The Wreckers "The Garden of Eves" |™Book #16

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The Wreckers "The Garden of Eves" |™Book #16

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Summary

In the sixteenth installment of the series, the Wreckers travel to the glittering, manufactured landscape of Dubai to face their most unconventional target yet: a beloved life-extension billionaire whose "marriage" consists of a captive workforce of identical women. Rather than dismantling a traditional relationship, Vanessa, Jordan, and their found family must deconstruct a deeply disturbing illusion built on stolen technology and erased identities. Operating in a city of flawless copies and immense wealth, the team must figure out how to safely awaken the captive women to their true selves and offer them a way out. Meanwhile, they must carefully navigate the complexities of a powerful man who is desperate to freeze time and preserve a singular memory at any cost.

Chapter 1

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter One: The Aquarium

[Segment 1 of 3]

The restaurant was underwater, which Vanessa considered the most honest thing about Dubai.

You descended to reach it — down through the gold-veined belly of Atlantis The Palm, past corridors that smelled of cold marble and money, until the doors opened and the ocean was simply *there*: a wall of it, three stories of lit blue glass holding back sixty-five thousand creatures who had never asked to be beautiful for anyone. Rays the size of dinner tables sailed past in slow formation. A school of silver jacks turned all at once, a single thought shared by a thousand bodies. Somewhere above them, the city was strung with two million lights pretending it was winter; down here there was no season at all, only the blue, and the hush, and the soft percussion of champagne being opened for people who had stopped hearing it years ago.

It was Christmas Eve, and the family was celebrating.

"I want it noted," Linnéa said, "that I have been good this year."

"Noted and rejected," Jordan said.

"I have been *strategically* good."

"That's not a category Santa recognizes."

"Then Santa," Linnéa said, lifting her glass, "has never worked in Stockholm."

They had the best table in the room — of course they did; Jordan had booked it in October under a name that existed only on paper, then rebooked it in December under their real ones, because that was the kind of year it had been — a long crescent of white linen set directly against the glass, close enough that the tank's light moved on their faces like weather. Five of them. To any other table in the room they looked like what Dubai assumed everyone was: rich, attractive, lightly criminal in the way of all interesting fortunes, and very pleased with themselves.

Four of those five things were true.

At the center sat Vanessa Smart — thirty-three years old by every document and thirty-two by her own sworn testimony, a one-year discount she had negotiated down from a full decade only last autumn, under circumstances the family knew better than to mention — dark auburn hair down for the occasion, wearing a column of deep green silk that did to the aquarium light what the aquarium light wanted done to it. Beside her, Jordan Harlan, thirty-four, the silver at his temples winning its long argument with the dark, his dinner jacket cut close, one arm along the back of her chair with the proprietary ease of a man who had stopped

pretending years ago that there was anywhere else his arm would rather be. They were not married. They had each been married once, to other people, badly, and what they were now had outlasted both marriages combined and had no name that fit on a form. *Partners* was the word they used in public. It was an abbreviation.

What they were, professionally, was this: the two best home-wreckers on Earth.

It was not a profession with a guild. There was no card. But for nearly four years now, in fourteen cities on four continents and once — though no one at the table discussed it sober — in a different century entirely, Vanessa and Jordan had walked into other people's marriages the way demolition engineers walk into condemned buildings: with respect, with planning, and with absolute confidence about how it ends. They seduced both halves. Husband and wife, each in their separate ways, each by the person best built for the job. They found the gap between the marriage people performed and the marriage that was actually true, and they widened that gap until the whole structure came down — cleanly, deliberately, and on schedule.

They had three rules, old as the partnership itself. *They don't fall in love with them. They don't keep them. And when the job is done, the reward is theirs and no one else's.* Once, the rules had been a prayer. Now they were engraved on a pistol in a Manhattan apartment, sitting beside a glass case containing a stub of charcoal that had once belonged to Niccolò Machiavelli — but that, as Linnéa liked to say, was a story for a different bottle.

The other three at the table were the family. Not employees — they had tried that word once and Tatum had looked so wounded that Jordan had bought her a foundation grant by way of apology. The Irregulars. Linnéa Bergström, platinum-blonde and Swedish and constitutionally incapable of being embarrassed, a former gymnast whose actual profession defied translation and whose dress tonight defied at least two local ordinances. Tatum Angstrom beside her, soft where Linnéa was sharp, warm where Linnéa was bright, her hand resting on Linnéa's thigh under the table with the settled calm of a woman who had long ago stopped asking whether she was allowed to be happy. And at the crescent's end, in black so perfectly cut it looked like a held breath: Aiko Nakamura, who had once been a target, and was now the most dangerous person at the table, which the table considered a fine joke and Aiko considered a reasonable assessment.

Five people. One family. Zero pending obligations.

Because the job was finished. Six weeks of it — November bleeding into December, the whole team deployed for the first time since Stockholm, all hands on a single doomed marriage — and it had ended four days ago, perfectly, the way the old jobs used to end, and tonight was the night the family allowed itself to say so out loud.

Jordan lifted his glass and the table quieted the way a theater quiets.

"To the Pembertons," he said.

[Segment 2 of 3]

"To the Pembertons," the table answered, and drank to the dead.

The Pembertons were not dead. The Pembertons were, at that hour, very much alive in two separate residences on two separate Palm fronds — Oliver Pemberton in the marital villa with his lawyers and his Macallan, and Saskia Pemberton-Vale, as of this morning's filing, in a borrowed penthouse in Marina with her phone turned off for the first time in nine years. What was dead was the marriage: a property-developer husband and an influencer wife, two people who had spent a decade performing a love story for an audience — his investors, her four million followers — until the performance was the only room in the house and neither of them could find the door.

The Wreckers had found the door.

"My favorite moment," Linnéa announced, "was the yacht."

"It's always the yacht with you," Tatum said.

"Because I am always *correct* about the yacht."

"Your favorite moment," Jordan said, "was watching a man explain blockchain to you for forty minutes while you wore a camera in your earring."

"That was professional suffering. I should be compensated."

"You were compensated."

"I should be compensated *again*."

Vanessa let the noise of them wash over her and watched the tank. A shiver of small golden fish poured past the glass like spilled coins. The job had been good. That was the truth she kept turning over, the way you turn a coin you suspect of being too lucky. Six weeks, no surprises, no moral vertigo, no one innocent — Oliver had been quietly moving marital assets offshore for three years; Saskia had been quietly in love with her own reflection for longer — and the wreck had come down with the clean inevitability of the old days, before Florence, before Miami, before the work had grown its complicated conscience. Vanessa had handled Oliver. Jordan had handled Saskia. Tatum had become the wife's confessor, Linnéa the husband's beautiful blind spot, Aiko the ghost in nine devices. On the final night, husband and wife had each discovered — separately, simultaneously, by design — exactly who the other had been performing for, and the marriage had not so much shattered as *exhaled*, like a building that had been holding its breath for years and was finally allowed to sit down.

No one ruined. Both of them freer. The fee, as always on jobs like this one, was nothing — they had never once worked for money, which was the single fact about them that intelligence agencies on three continents found hardest to believe.

"You're doing the thing," Jordan said quietly, just for her.

"What thing."

"The thing where you audit a finished job for cracks."

"I'm admiring the fish."

"You're admiring the fish the way Carver admires a bank statement."

"Don't," Vanessa said, "say that woman's name during the holidays," and Jordan laughed, low, and refilled her glass, and under the table her ankle hooked his and stayed.

Across the crescent, Aiko was being made to participate in joy, an annual tradition. Linnéa had produced — from where, no one asked — five paper crowns, and was distributing them with the solemnity of a coronation. Aiko regarded hers as though it might be load-bearing.

"It's *festive*," Linnéa said.

"It's combustible."

"Everything wonderful is combustible."

"This is why Sweden has no empire," Aiko said, and put the crown on with two precise hands, perfectly level, and the table cheered, and a passing sommelier smiled at them the way the staff had smiled all night — at the gorgeous loud family against the glass who tipped like sailors and laughed like a conspiracy.

Tatum raised her glass for the second toast, the one that was hers by custom because she was the heart and everyone knew it.

"To the family," she said. "All of us. Another year, nobody fell, nobody kept—" the old words, worn smooth as beach glass, "—and everyone came home." Her eyes shone a little; they always did; nobody teased her anymore. "And to whatever's next. May it be interesting."

"May it be *after New Year's*," Jordan amended.

"May it be on a beach," said Linnéa.

"May it never find us at all," Vanessa said, smiling, and the five glasses touched over the white linen with a sound like a small, bright bell — and that, of course, was the precise moment the room behind them began to applaud.

Vanessa would think about that later. That they had toasted *may it never find us*, and the universe, which had been eavesdropping on them for sixteen jobs, had taken it as a cue.

She turned, they all turned, the whole blue room turned —

and Santa Claus walked into the aquarium.

[Segment 3 of 3]

Not a hotel Santa. That was Vanessa's first professional observation, arriving before she had decided to make one. Hotel Santas are upholstered — padded bellies, rented boots, college kids sweating under nylon beards. This Santa was *built*. Tall, easily Jordan's height, the suit not a costume but a commission: deep crimson velvet tailored to broad shoulders and a tapered waist, white fur trim that had never been near a polyester mill, black boots with the dull glow of bespoke leather. The beard was his own — full, silvered, groomed to a point just

shy of vanity — and above it the face was tanned, handsome, sixty years old the way only serious money gets to be sixty: like a fortress with excellent lighting. He came down the entry stairs into the blue light with a sack over one shoulder and the unhurried gait of a man who had never once arrived anywhere unwelcome.

The room *loved* him. That was the second observation. This was not the startled delight of strangers — this was recognition. Diners were rising half out of chairs, phones were appearing, the maître d' was crossing the floor with both hands extended like a man greeting his own retirement. Whoever this was, he had done this before, in this room, and the room had been waiting.

"Ho," the Santa said, conversationally, to the nearest table, in a low Atlantic-crossing accent that placed him nowhere and cost a fortune. "Ho, ho."

And behind him came the elves.

They entered in single file, in step, and the first thing every eye in the room understood — before counting, before thinking — was that they matched. Eight women. Identical costumes: short green velvet dresses trimmed in white, red sashes, soft pointed caps. That much was normal; that much was choreography. It took the eye another second to register what was not normal. The women matched *under* the costumes. The same height, to the centimeter. The same slender build, the same warm golden-brown complexion, the same long black hair falling past the shoulder blades, the same age — late twenties, perhaps, or made to read as it. Eight women from across Southeast Asia, surely strangers once, arranged into a single repeating figure, like one woman reflected down a corridor of mirrors.

They fanned out through the room and began, in the only phrase for it, to spread cheer. Wrapped gifts came out of the sack and were distributed to tables with curtsies. Crackers were pulled. A carol began, started by one elf in a clear sweet soprano and taken up by the others in practiced harmony — *O Holy Night*, of all things, rising up the glass wall while the rays sailed past overhead, indifferent as angels. Diners laughed and clapped along. An envelope passed from the Santa's hand to the maître d', another to the sommelier, with the smooth lateral motion of a man who tipped the way other men breathed.

"Okay," Linnéa said, delighted, paper crown askew. "Dubai wins Christmas. I'm calling it. Stockholm could *never*—"

She stopped.

Vanessa was already watching the room the way she watched everything — cataloguing, indexing, doing arithmetic she didn't yet have a use for — so she saw the moment it happened. One of the elves had reached the neighboring table, three meters away, close enough that the tank's light caught her face as she straightened from setting down a small silver-wrapped box. A lovely face. Composed, professional, smiling the smile they were all smiling, the smile that was part of the costume.

Linnéa was staring at her with no smile at all.

"Maricel?" Linnéa said.

Not loud. Barely a question. The name just left her, the way names do when they've been asleep in you for years — and the elf's eyes passed across Linnéa's face. Paused. A half-second. A flicker of *something*, deep under the composure, like a fish turning far down in dark water.

Then the woman looked straight through her — through Linnéa Bergström, who had never in her life been looked through — smiled the costume's smile at the whole table evenly, wished them a happy Christmas in soft accented English, and moved on to spread cheer somewhere else.

Linnéa sat very still. At the far end of the crescent, Aiko had gone quiet in a different key — her eyes tracking not the women but the *pattern* of them, the spacing, the synchrony, a choreography that no amount of rehearsal should have made that frictionless. Tatum's hand had found Linnéa's. Jordan's arm had not moved from the back of Vanessa's chair, but Vanessa could feel that it had changed weight, the way it did when the man inside the dinner jacket quietly went to work.

The Santa was making his way down the room now, table to table, gracious as a king at his own coronation, and the blue light moved on his crimson shoulders, and behind him eight identical women sang about a weary world rejoicing.

"Vanessa," Jordan said, very pleasantly, watching him come. "What do you see?"

It was the oldest question in the partnership. The one that started every job.

Vanessa looked at the most beloved man in the room. She looked at the corridor of mirrored women. She looked, last, at the great glass wall behind them all — at the sixty-five thousand beautiful creatures swimming in slow circles inside a world that fed them, lit them, kept them, and would never, ever open.

"I see a man," she said, "who built his own aquarium."

She reached for her glass.

"Merry Christmas, everyone. We're not going home tomorrow."

Chapter 2

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Two: Holly

Christmas morning arrived in the suite the way mornings did in Dubai — without weather, without mercy, a flat gold light over a flat gold sea — and found four of the five of them around the long table on the terrace, and Linnéa standing at the rail, not eating, which in eleven years no one had ever seen.

"She was up at five," Tatum said quietly.

"She was up at four," Aiko said, not looking up from her tablet. "She used the gym at four. I heard her."

Vanessa carried her coffee to the rail and stood beside Linnéa and said nothing, which was the correct thing to say. Below them the Palm stretched out its absurd fronds into the Gulf, every villa with its pool, every pool with its blue. Somewhere down there the Pembertons were waking up divorced. It already felt like a story about other people.

"We danced together," Linnéa said finally. "Stockholm. Five years ago — the winter cabaret at Berns, eight weeks. Maricel Bautista. She was the best mover in the company and the company knew it and hated her politely, the Swedish way." A small breath that was not quite a laugh. "She taught me a lift I still use. She talked about her mother's cooking the way other dancers talk about choreographers. We were not — " she made a gesture, two fingers, dismissing the question before anyone asked it — "we were *friends*. Real ones. And then her visa ended and the company didn't fight for it, and she went home, and we did the thing everyone does. Messages for a year. Then likes. Then nothing."

"And last night she looked at you," Vanessa said, "like a window."

"Last night she looked at me like a *wall*," Linnéa said. "Windows you can see something behind."

Behind them, Aiko turned the tablet around and set it against the fruit bowl, and the family gathered, because the tablet meant school was in session.

"Elliott Fordham," Aiko said. "Since none of you slept either."

The face from the restaurant looked out at them — beardless in most of the photographs, younger in some, the same fortress bones in all of them. Aiko walked them through it with her usual economy. Sixty-one years old. Born Bristol, made in Singapore, perfected in Dubai. Three fortunes, each respectable: medical devices in the nineties, a chain of surgical clinics in the two-thousands, and then, for the last fifteen years, the thing his name now meant — *Fordham Longevity*, the most exclusive life-extension institute in the Gulf, a marble campus on its own inlet where men with nine zeroes went to buy back their telomeres. Plasma protocols. Cellular reprogramming. A waiting list that was itself a status symbol. He had been profiled by everyone, sued by no one, photographed with three kings, and was on

record, in a famous *Financial Times* interview, saying the sentence that Aiko now read aloud without inflection:

"*Death is a logistics problem. Logistics problems have always been solved by men who refused to accept the schedule.*"

"Charming," Jordan said.

"Beloved," Aiko corrected. "That is the part you need to hold on to. He is not a recluse and he is not a rumor. He is the most popular rich man in this city. He funds the children's hospital wing. He does the Santa appearance every Christmas Eve — Ossiano is the third stop of four; it is a *tradition*, there are compilation videos. And the women — " she swiped, and the table went quiet, because the screen now showed a society-page photograph, a charity gala, Fordham in black tie at the center of a perfect symmetrical fan of eight identical women in identical midnight-blue gowns — "the women are not a secret. That is what I need you to understand before anyone says the word that I know is sitting in this room. There is no exposé to write. They have been photographed for years. The press calls them his household. The city calls them — " a pause, the only pause Aiko permitted herself — "the Hollys."

"The what," Tatum said.

"They are all named Holly," Aiko said. "He introduces them that way. The gossip pages find it eccentric and delightful. *Which Holly is your favorite* is apparently a parlor game on the yacht circuit." She set the tablet down. "Eight at public events, always eight. Employment visas through a domestic-staffing company he owns. Recruited through agencies in Manila, Jakarta, Phnom Penh — I found the advertisements; they are immaculate; they offer salaries four times market rate for 'household presentation staff,' and they specify height, age, and hair to the centimeter, and every word of it is legal."

The terrace was silent except for the flat gold sea.

"Maricel Bautista," Linnéa said, "has a name."

"Yes," Aiko said. "And this morning, for approximately three hours, she will be allowed to use it. It's Christmas Day. There is one place in this city a Catholic employer with a public image must let his Filipina staff go, and he gains by allowing it, because it photographs as kindness." She turned the tablet around one last time: a church, white and modest and besieged by joyful thousands, a building Vanessa thought looked like a dove in a city of falcons.

"St. Mary's, Oud Metha," Aiko said. "Christmas Mass. All of Catholic Dubai in one courtyard."

Linnéa was already moving toward her room to change.

"Linnéa," Vanessa said.

She stopped.

"Not as a Wrecker," Vanessa said. "Not yet. This morning you're just a friend she lost. That's the truest thing we have. Don't spend it."

There were eleven Masses at St. Mary's on Christmas Day, and still the church could not hold the city's joy.

They went at ten — Linnéa and Tatum inside the gates, Vanessa across the road at a café table with sunglasses and a newspaper she wasn't reading, because some habits were load-bearing. The compound overflowed. Thousands moved through the courtyard in their best clothes under the flat winter sun: Filipino families four generations deep, Indian and Lebanese and Goan and Korean, children in stiff new shoes, grandmothers commanding folding chairs, a choir audible from inside the packed church and half the courtyard singing along with it through the open doors because the building had run out of room for the voices. Vendors at the gate sold *parols* — the Filipino Christmas lanterns, bamboo and capiz-shell stars lit from within — and the railings bloomed with them, constellations at noon.

It was, Tatum would say later, the happiest place she had ever conducted surveillance.

They found her by the grotto on the courtyard's quiet side, after the second Mass let out. Linnéa saw her first and stopped walking.

Out of costume she was almost camouflaged — that was the first heartbreak, how thoroughly the uniform had been doing the seeing for everyone. A woman in a plain blue dress and flat sandals, long black hair pulled back simply, standing alone before the white statue of the Virgin with her lips moving, a string of wooden beads turning slowly through her fingers. Around her the crowd parted and re-formed without touching her. She had the stillness of someone rationing something.

Linnéa approached the way you approach a deer or a memory — from the side, unhurried, hands visible.

"In Stockholm," Linnéa said, in a voice with no performance left in it, "you told me Swedish people sing like they are apologizing to the song."

The beads stopped.

"And I said you were wrong, and you said, *then prove it, sing,* and I sang, and you laughed so hard the stage manager came." Linnéa's eyes were bright and her chin was not entirely steady. "Hej, Maricel."

For a long moment the woman did not turn. Vanessa, across the road, watched through the railing-stars and could read the whole war in the line of her back — the discipline that had looked through Linnéa last night fighting something older than the discipline.

Then Maricel Bautista turned around, and she was not a wall, and she was not a window. She was a door that had been closed for three years, opening the width of a face.

"Linnéa," she said. "Your roots are showing."

And Linnéa Bergström — who had laughed at customs officers and oligarchs and once, memorably, at armed men — made a sound like something breaking upward, and the two women collided into an embrace by the grotto, and around them Christmas went on, vast and golden and unsuspicious, the best cover either of them would ever have.

They sat on a low wall in the shade of the parish school, the three of them, Tatum a respectful half-step of distance away being introduced as exactly what she was — *my Tatum* — and for ten entire minutes it was only joy, and nobody at the suite would have recognized Linnéa, because she let it be only joy, which was the hardest tradecraft of her life.

It was Maricel who ended it. Vanessa could have called the timestamp from across the road: the moment the woman's eyes went to her watch, then to the gate, then — swift, involuntary, trained — to the faces in the crowd, sorting them for one that might be sorting *her*.

"You were at the aquarium," Maricel said. "Last night."

"Yes."

"You said my name." She looked down at the beads in her lap. "Do you know, you are the first person in this country to ever say it? Three years. The priest says it, at communion — I told him once, he remembered." A small smile with weights tied to it. "Father Anil. He says, *the Body of Christ, Maricel*, and I think he does not know what he gives me."

"Maricel," Linnéa said carefully, "last night —"

"Last night I could not know you." It came out flat and rehearsed, a rule recited. Then, softer, her own voice again: "We are presentation staff. We do not have acquaintances at events. It is in the handbook. There is a handbook." She turned the beads. "I saw you and I thought I was dreaming standing up. It happens, you know. When you are very far from home, on the exact wrong night. You see faces."

"The wrong night," Tatum said gently.

Maricel looked up at her — at this soft-eyed stranger — and Vanessa watched her make the decision that every confession requires, the decision that the listener is real.

"Do you know what Noche Buena is?" Maricel said.

"Tell me," Tatum said.

"It is Christmas Eve. But that is like saying the sea is water." Maricel's hands settled around the beads and stilled, and when she spoke again her voice had gone somewhere else entirely — east, and backward. "In Pampanga, where I am from, Christmas begins in September. The radio starts. The *parols* go up — my father made ours, every year a new one, he could not help himself, bamboo and shell, as tall as me. Nine days before Christmas there is Simbang Gabi — Mass at four in the morning, nine mornings, in the dark and the cold, and if you

complete all nine you may ask God for one wish. I completed it thirteen years in a row. Thirteen wishes." A breath. "And then Christmas Eve, at midnight, after the last Mass: Noche Buena. The whole family at one table. My mother's table. *Lechon* if it was a good year, and her *queso de bola*, and the ham with the pineapple, and my aunts arguing about whose recipe, and the children under the table, and the karaoke machine that my uncle wins every year because no one has the heart to score him honestly." Her eyes were dry and that was somehow worse. "Everyone awake at midnight. Everyone *home* at midnight. There is no Filipino anywhere on earth who does not know exactly what is happening at that table without them."

The courtyard noise went on around them, ten thousand miles from Pampanga.

"Last night was my third Noche Buena in a costume," Maricel said. "We did four restaurants. We sang *O Holy Night* eleven times — I counted; counting helps. People clapped. He gave envelopes. At midnight exactly, my mother's table was sitting down, and I was in an aquarium handing a wrapped box of dates to a Russian man who looked at my legs. And I smiled, because smiling is in the handbook, and I thought: somewhere under all this water it is midnight in Pampanga." She unclenched her hands deliberately, finger by finger, a practiced exercise. "The money is real. I want to say that. My mother's roof is new. My brother is in nursing school. Four times what I could — it is not a trick, the salary. He does not touch us. Whatever you are thinking, he has never — it is not that." She said it quickly, the way you defend a thing you need to keep being true. "It is only that he..."

She stopped. She looked at the *parols* burning on the railing in broad daylight.

"He collects the outside of us," Maricel said. "And he is very gentle with it, the outside. The hair the same, the height the same, the walk — there are lessons, in the beginning, weeks of lessons, to walk the same, to speak the same, until the eight of us are one woman in a mirror that goes around a corner. And he calls us Holly. All of us. Me, Rosamie, Dewi, Chanthou, the two Marias — Holly, Holly, Holly. He says it is easier for the guests." The beads turned once. "It is not easier for the guests. The guests would learn eight names; guests learn the names of *racehorses*. It is easier for him. One name does not go home to Pampanga. One name does not have a mother's table. One name has no Noche Buena to be missing." She smiled the costume's smile, deliberately, so they could see exactly what it was made of. "Holly is always available for Christmas."

Nobody spoke. In the church the choir began again, faint and enormous.

"How many of you are there?" Linnéa asked. "We saw eight."

Maricel's eyes did the gate-and-crowd sweep again. When she answered, it was at the volume of the rosary.

"Eight go out," she said. "We are more at the house."

And then, before the question under that could be asked, she stood — abruptly, gracefully, three years of handbook in the motion — and smoothed the plain blue dress, and was already becoming smooth and unknowable again, the wall rebuilding itself course by course in front of their eyes.

"The van comes at one," she said. "I should not be seen sitting long with anyone. Linnéa — " and here the wall faltered, one last gap, and Maricel Bautista looked at her old friend with an expression that Vanessa, across the road, could not see, and that Linnéa would not be able to describe to the family afterward without stopping twice — "I am glad it was you who said my name. But you must not fix this. You were always fixing things, the lifts, the schedules, everyone's love affairs. This is a good job. Many people depend — you must not."

"Maricel —"

"Wish me Merry Christmas," she said. "That is all. In this courtyard people are only wishing each other Merry Christmas."

So Linnéa stood, and took both her hands, and did not promise anything, out loud.

"Merry Christmas, Maricel," she said.

"Merry Christmas, Linnéa."

And the best mover Berns Salonger ever politely hated walked out through the gate of stars, past the *parol* sellers, to wherever the van was, and did not look back, because looking back was not in the handbook.

Across the road, Vanessa folded the newspaper she had not read.

She was thinking about thirteen years of Simbang Gabi. Nine Masses in the dark, nine mornings, thirteen years — and you may ask God for one wish. She was thinking that somewhere in that arithmetic was a wish that had gone unanswered long enough, and that God, this year, in His infinite and well-documented sense of humor, had chosen to subcontract.

She left bills on the table and crossed the road to collect her family.

Chapter 3

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Three: The Definition of a Home

They held the war council that night on the terrace, because Jordan had swept the suite twice and the terrace once, and because some conversations needed open sky over them even when the sky was rented.

Christmas Day had burned itself down to a blue evening. Across the water the city had switched on — the Burj a needle of light sewing the dark together, the Marina towers stacked like lit ice — and the Gulf lay flat and black and patient. Room service had come and gone, leaving a table that looked like the aftermath of a small, well-funded war: lamb, mezze, two empty bottles, one full one being held in reserve like cavalry. Linnéa had not eaten much. Everyone had noticed and no one had mentioned it, which was the family's highest form of attention.

Vanessa waited until the staff were gone and the door was locked and the bottle was open. Then she set her glass down and called the meeting to order the way she always did — by saying nothing, and looking around the table once, slowly, until the silence agreed to work for her.

"All right," she said. "Somebody define the job."

"Find Fordham," Linnéa said immediately. "Wreck Fordham. Burn the handbook. Drive Maricel to the airport personally. I'll do it in heels."

"That's a mission statement," Vanessa said. "I asked for a definition."

"It's a *good* mission statement."

"It's a beautiful mission statement, and if we run on it we'll be improvising by February and somebody will get hurt, probably one of the twenty women we'd be claiming to help." Vanessa turned her glass a quarter-turn on the linen. "We have done sixteen of these. Every one of them — every single one, including the century we don't discuss sober — had the same architecture underneath, and you all know the architecture, and I want someone at this table to tell me it applies here. Because I spent today trying, and I couldn't do it."

Jordan leaned back, arm over the empty chair beside him, and recited it like a man reading load-bearing specifications off a blueprint. "A marriage is two people performing a version of themselves for each other. We seduce both halves. Each of them shows us the truth they've been hiding from their spouse, the gap opens, the structure fails along the gap. Demolition by honesty." He looked at Vanessa. "And her point, which she is going to make us work for, is: who are the two people?"

"Who are the two people," Vanessa agreed. "Fordham is one. Show me the other half. Show me the *spouse*."

"Eight spouses," Linnéa said. "Twenty. However many are at the house."

"Are they?" Vanessa let it sit. "Maricel stood in that courtyard today and told us three true things, and the first one was *he does not touch us*. You saw her say it." She glanced at Tatum, who nodded slowly. "I believe her. Which means whatever that household is, it isn't what the yacht circuit smirks about. There's no adultery to engineer because there's no bed to engineer it out of. There's no jealousy to weaponize because the man is not in love with any of them — that's the entire point of the name. You cannot make a man jealous over Holly. Holly is *replaceable*. Replaceability is the design."

"Then it's not a marriage," Aiko said quietly, from the end of the table. "It's a workforce."

"It's a *legal* workforce," Jordan said. "Which is the other wall of this box, so let's touch it now and get it over with. I went through everything Aiko pulled. The staffing company is real and clean. The visas are real. The salaries are not just legal, they're generous — four times market, paid on time, documented. The contracts have exit clauses. On paper, any of those women can resign tomorrow." He raised a hand before Linnéa could come over the table. "On *paper*. I know. The passport is 'kept safe' in a man's office, the family's roof depends on the next transfer, the exit clause is written in a language of leverage those women can read better than any lawyer. It's a cage. But it's a cage made entirely of things that are allowed, in a jurisdiction we don't control, owned by the most beloved man in the city, who has committed — as far as any system on earth is concerned — no crime." He poured himself a finger of wine he didn't drink. "I'm not saying that to stop us. I'm saying it because every previous job, the structure we attacked was held up by secrets. This one is held up in broad daylight. You can't expose a man the city has already seen."

The terrace was quiet. Far below, a pleasure boat drew a line of white across the black water and erased itself behind its own wake.

"Then we walk," Tatum said.

Everyone looked at her. She had her hands folded around her glass and her chin level, and she met Linnéa's stare without flinching, which cost her something visible.

"Somebody has to say it out loud, so it's me," Tatum said. "We just finished a job. It's Christmas. We are four days into a celebration we earned. There is no client, no crime, no marriage, and the one woman inside that house who has spoken to us looked Linnéa in the eye and said *you must not fix this*. Not 'help me.' Not 'be careful.' *You must not.* She has done the math we haven't — she knows what happens to twenty women's salaries and twenty families' roofs if a billionaire's household becomes a scandal. She knows what happens to *her* if Fordham ever learns she sat on a wall with strangers on Christmas Day." Her voice stayed soft and didn't waver. "We have a rule older than the three on the gun, and it's this: we have never once wrecked anything for someone who asked us not to. Britta wanted to be saved and didn't know how to want it out loud — that was Stockholm, and we read her right. But if we read Maricel wrong, we are not Wreckers, we're just one more rich table deciding what's best for the staff. I love you," she said to Linnéa, "and I will hold your coat in any fight you pick for her. But somebody at this table has to be the person who says she told us no."

Linnéa's jaw worked. The lights of the Marina did slow arithmetic on the water.

"She didn't tell us no," Linnéa said at last, and her voice was stripped of all its glitter, down to the Swedish steel underneath. "I know her. I knew her before the handbook. *You must not fix this* — Tatum, my love, you heard a refusal. I heard a woman warning rescuers off a minefield because she's already mapped it and she doesn't believe anyone walks it without setting one off. That isn't no. That's a spec sheet." She looked around the table. "And the other thing. The thing none of you saw, because none of you knew her in Stockholm. The woman on that wall today rationed her own joy. Ten minutes — I watched her give herself ten minutes of being Maricel, like a prisoner spending canteen money, and then I watched her put it away and put the wall back up *by hand*, course by course, while still sitting there. People who are free don't do that. People who have decided to survive do that." She turned her glass over, empty, a small flat punctuation. "I sang in front of a hundred Swedes because that woman dared me to. She is the reason I know what brave looks like. And brave is in that house being called Holly."

Nobody answered for a moment. Then Aiko spoke, and as always when Aiko finally spent words, the table turned to receive them.

"You are arguing the wrong question," Aiko said. "All of you. Marriage, workforce, harem, household — you are trying to find the noun, because the rules are written about a noun, and if you find the noun the rules will tell you what to do, and you can stop being responsible for the decision." She folded her hands. "I was a target once. May I tell you what the noun was in my house?"

Vanessa nodded. Around the table the family went very still; Aiko spent this coin perhaps once a year.

"Haruto and I were a marriage by every definition that exists," Aiko said. "Two people, one license, fourteen years. And it was *less* of a home than what Maricel described today — at least the Hollys have each other; I had a man and a machine he preferred. So I am not impressed by definitions. Definitions are the outside of things, and we are supposed to be the people who see the inside." She tipped her head a fraction, the closest she came to leaning forward. "Here is the inside, as I see it. Twenty-some women have had their names removed. Not their bodies harmed, not their wages stolen — their *names*, the load-bearing wall of a person, taken so gently and so legally that even the woman it was taken from defends the transaction, because the price was a roof in Pampanga and the alternative was worse. Consent purchased at that exchange rate is real — Maricel signed; I respect her signature — and it is also the precise mechanism by which every gilded cage in history has been locked from the inside. Both of those things are true at once. That is what makes it interesting." She paused. "And there is one more thing I cannot yet prove, so I will say it as an observation and let it sit. Eight women do not walk in step like that because of lessons. I have built synchrony, in software, with machines — I know what it costs. Whatever produced what we saw at the aquarium, 'weeks of lessons in the beginning' is either the whole of it, in which case Fordham has discovered something about human beings that armies would pay for — or it is not the whole of it." She unfolded her hands. "I would like to know which. Professionally."

Jordan exhaled through his nose, slowly. "There it is."

"There it is," Vanessa agreed softly.

"So put it to the question," Jordan said. "But before we vote on whether — somebody still has to answer Vanessa's *how*. Say everything Aiko said is right. Say Linnéa's read is right and Tatum's caution is right and we hold both, the way we held Miami. The playbook still has a hole where the spouse goes. We have never wrecked a structure we couldn't seduce from both ends. Who is the other half of Elliott Fordham's marriage?"

And Vanessa, who had been waiting all evening for someone to ask the question correctly, smiled — the slow one, the one the family privately called *load the trucks*.

"Holly," she said.

The terrace went silent.

"He's married, all right," Vanessa said. "Tatum's wrong that there's no marriage and Linnéa's wrong about who it's to. He's not married to twenty women — he's spent a fortune making sure he never has to be married to even one of them, because one of them could disappoint him, age, argue, leave, *be a person*. No. Elliott Fordham is married to Holly. One woman. The woman he built — out of height requirements and hair to the centimeter and walking lessons and a name with no mother's table attached. A wife with no inside. A wife who is always twenty-eight, always smiling, always available for Christmas, and always, always *there*, because when one body carrying her gets tired he rotates in another, the way you re-cast a long-running play." She looked around the table, and the aquarium was in her voice when she finished it. "The most beloved man in Dubai has been married for years to a woman who does not exist. *That* is the marriage. It has both halves. It has a performing spouse and a hidden truth, exactly like every other job we've ever taken — the only difference is that this time, the gap between the version and the truth isn't running through one person's heart. It's running through twenty."

"And we wreck it how?" Tatum asked — not resisting now; reading the blueprint.

"The way we always do. We seduce both halves." Vanessa held up one finger. "Jordan takes the husband. Fordham has an inside too — nobody builds a wife with no inside unless his own inside has something in it he can't look at, and I want to know what that is before we touch anything else, because what's in there decides whether this ends in ruin or release, and we are not the people we were in Book One; we check now." A second finger. "And I take the wife. I seduce Holly — out of existence. Which means the real work, the slow work, the work that is actually twenty separate jobs wearing one costume: Maricel, Rosamie, Dewi, Chanthou, the two Marias, and every name we don't know yet. You can't kill a fiction with a press leak, Jordan's right. You kill a fiction the way fictions die — when the people performing it stop. One woman at a time, each one her own decision, each one her own *yes*, or we don't move her at all." She looked at Tatum. "That's your answer, and it's the only one I have, and I think it's the right one. We don't fix anything Maricel told us not to fix. We make it possible for twenty women to fix it themselves, or refuse to, each in her own name. The household isn't the target. The household is the *client* — it just hasn't hired us yet."

"And if they all say no?" Tatum asked. "Every one of them. If the roofs and the brothers in nursing school outvote the names?"

"Then we will have spent a season learning twenty women's real names and giving them somewhere to put the truth," Vanessa said, "and we'll leave the master of the house untouched, and it will be the only job in sixteen books we walked away from on purpose twice." She said it without flinching. "That's the term sheet. Vote."

Jordan looked at her for a long moment — the look that had crossed fourteen cities and one borrowed century — and then rapped one knuckle on the table. "The husband's mine. In."

"In," Linnéa said instantly. "Obviously. Eternally. In heels."

Aiko inclined her head. "In. The synchrony is mine. I want to know what's under the lessons."

Tatum was last. She sat with it honestly, the way she sat with everything, and the family gave her the silence, because her *yes* was the only one that would make it true instead of merely exciting.

"One condition," she said finally. "We keep her words in the room. Maricel said *you must not fix this* — I want it written wherever we write things. Every plan we make answers to that sentence. The day any of this stops being something those women choose and starts being something we do *to* them, I call it, and we go home, and nobody argues." She looked at Vanessa. "That's my price."

"Paid," Vanessa said. "It goes above the three rules for the duration. House rule, this job only: *their names, their call.*"

"Then in," Tatum said, and let out the breath she'd been holding since the courtyard, and reached for the cavalry bottle herself.

Jordan poured five glasses. Out across the black water the city glittered its nightly argument that anything could be built if the money held, and somewhere west of the Marina, behind walls none of them had seen yet, a house full of one woman was finishing its third Christmas.

"No toast," Linnéa said. "Not for this one. It would feel — " she searched for it — "borrowed."

"No toast," Vanessa agreed. "We'll drink at the end, when we know whose names we're drinking to."

So they drank without one, quietly, five people around a table in the sky — and below them and around them and ahead of them, vast and lit and unsuspecting, the city kept Christmas, and the Gulf kept its counsel, and in a marble house on a private inlet, a man who believed death was a logistics problem slept soundly beside no one at all.

Chapter 4

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Four: The City of Versions

The day after Christmas, Vanessa got up in the dark and went to look at the city's real face, and Jordan came with her, because the rule had come into effect at midnight and neither of them could sleep in a bed that suddenly had a law inside it.

The rule was the third one — *the reward is theirs and no one else's* — and it had a clause the family never had to say out loud anymore: during a job, the reward waited. All of it. Even — *especially* — each other. It had been easy enough on the short jobs, a held breath, two weeks of professional electricity. It had nearly killed them both in Stockholm. And last night, after the vote, after the wine, they had stood on either side of the connecting door between their adjoining suites and performed the small ceremony that began every job: each of them turned their own bolt, one click from each side, two locks and one law, and then they had stood there listening to each other breathe through six centimeters of engineered wood until Vanessa said *goodnight, partner* in a voice that should have required a permit, and went to bed alone on principle.

This job, by every estimate on the board, would run months.

"You realize," Jordan said now, conversationally, as the water taxi puttered them across the black silk of the Creek, "that we've done this to ourselves."
"We have a rule."
"We have a rule," he agreed, "whose all-time record currently stands at forty days. We set it in October. It nearly ended us both, there's a gun in Manhattan commemorating it, and last night, at Christmas, in a city with the most beautiful hotel beds on Earth, we volunteered to triple it."
"Builds character," Vanessa said serenely.

The abra they rode was older than the skyline. That was the thing about Dubai that the postcards got exactly backward: the glass city on the postcards was the *new* version, fifty years old at most, an invention so recent that men still living remembered when the tallest thing on the horizon was a wind tower. But down here, on the Creek at dawn, the first city was still running. Wooden water taxis crossed the tide the way they had for a century, one dirham a seat, ferrying laborers and clerks and one pair of unusually attentive tourists between Deira and Bur Dubai while the rising light turned the water to hammered brass. Along the wharves, ocean-going dhows three stories tall sat loaded to the rails with the unglamorous truth of the place — tires, refrigerators, sacks of rice, washing machines bound for Somalia and bicycles bound for Iran — commerce as it had been run since before oil, before glass, before anyone thought to put a Santa in an aquarium.

They got off on the Deira side and walked, because walking a city was how Vanessa read one, and she read cities the way she read spouses — never trusting the face it made for visitors, always looking for the load-bearing truths underneath. The spice souk was opening

around them, sacks of dried lemons and frankincense and rose petals exhaling their argument into the cool air; then the gold souk, shutter after shutter rolling up on windows so crowded with bullion that the metal stopped meaning anything, kilograms of it draped on velvet like a dragon's yard sale. Men from six nations drank karak tea from glasses the size of thimbles. Somewhere a muezzin cleared his throat into a microphone, and the dawn prayer unrolled over the rooftops, older than every fortune in the city, entirely unimpressed by all of them.

"Pearls," Vanessa said, as they walked. "That was the first version. For a hundred years this town sold pearls — free divers, no equipment, the best pearl banks in the world right offshore. Whole economy, whole identity. And then in the 1930s the Japanese figured out how to *culture* pearls — grow a perfect copy on demand — and the natural pearl market died in a decade, and this entire coast nearly starved." She stopped at a stall and bought two glasses of karak from a man who blessed her change. "The city was almost killed by the invention of the flawless copy. I keep turning that over. It feels like it's on our syllabus."

Jordan looked at her over the rim of his tea with the expression he reserved for the moments when she did the thing that he could not, even now, watch her do without wanting to break a rule. "And the second version was oil, and the third version is *that* — " he nodded across the Creek, downriver, to where the far-off needle of the Burj Khalifa was taking the first sun like a struck match — "and the whole place is a man who reinvented himself three times and dares you to ask about the previous names."

"Which is why I like it here," Vanessa said. "And why he's *here*, Jordan. Fordham didn't pick this city for the tax treatment. A man who is editing his own past lives where everyone is editing their own past. It's the only town on Earth where nobody will ever ask him the obvious question."

"Which is?"

"Where's the original."

They walked back through Al Fahidi as the heat came up — the old quarter, coral-stone and gypsum, wind towers standing over narrow lanes like patient chess pieces, the last surviving paragraph of the first Dubai preserved between the glass sentences of the third — and took the abra home across water now crowded and bright, and did not hold hands the entire way, with tremendous discipline, while the city of versions assembled itself around them for another day of being whatever you needed it to be.

By the time they got back to the suite, the war room was up and the family was at it.

The dining table had disappeared under Aiko's preferred ecosystem — three laptops, the tablet, a roll of paper she still insisted on for thinking — and the wall behind it had become the board. Twenty silhouettes, printed identical, arranged in a fan around a photograph of Elliott Fordham in black tie. Under three of the silhouettes, names: *MARICEL BAUTISTA. ROSAMIE (—?). DEWI (—?)*. Under the rest, nothing yet. Tatum had insisted on the arrangement — the names going up under the faces one at a time, as they were learned and *only* as they were earned — and nobody had argued, because the board was the house rule made visible: a wall of Hollys slowly turning back into people.

"Dispatches," Vanessa said, dropping into a chair. "Linnéa."

Linnéa was upside down on the sofa with her feet on the backrest, eating someone else's room-service fruit, dressed for a brunch that started in ninety minutes. "Boxing Day brunch at the Bvlgari, then the afternoon yacht thing off the Royal Mirage, then drinks with the horrifying Carrington-Howells. By tonight I will be three mimosas from the center of every conversation on this coast." She held up a strawberry like a scepter. "Two items of business. One: the gala. Fordham's New Year's Eve party has used the same designer for six years — Sabine Roche, Paris, very good, very expensive, very bored, I checked. As of this morning, Sabine has received an approach she cannot refuse — a Monegasque royal engagement party, New Year's Eve, triple her fee, arranged through a friend of a friend of mine who owes me from the Stockholm winter and is delighted to be square." She bit the strawberry. "No harm done to anyone. Sabine gets a prince, Monaco gets Sabine, and Elliott Fordham wakes up tomorrow with the most important party of his year and no designer, in a town where, by an astonishing coincidence, the great Vanessa Smart is wintering."

"And item two?" Jordan asked.

The upside-down brightness flickered, just slightly. "Item two is that I have spent two days listening to how this town talks about the household," Linnéa said. "There's a drinking game on the yacht circuit. *Which Holly is your favorite.* They rank them, Jordan. There's a man — I will give you his name when I can say it without spitting — who claims he can tell two of them apart by their wrists and considers this a *romantic accomplishment*." She righted herself with gymnast economy and sat properly, and the party voice fell off her like a dropped coat. "Nobody knows their names. Three years some of these women have stood at parties this city photographs every week, and I cannot find one human being who has wondered what they're called. The city decided it was charming and then it stopped looking. That's the cover he's built. Not walls. *Charm.*"

"Then we'll work inside the charm," Vanessa said quietly. "Tatum."

Tatum had the seat nearest the board, where she always sat now, half-turned toward the silhouettes as if keeping them company. "Father Anil and I had coffee after the seven a.m. Mass," she said. "I was honest with him — the version of honest we agreed: friends of Maricel's, worried, careful, asking nothing that puts anyone at risk. He's no fool. He looked at me for a long time and then he said, 'I have twenty parishioners I have never once seen at the same Mass as each other,' and let that sit, and then he started talking." She opened her notebook — paper, like Aiko's roll, because some things you keep off every network. "They're allowed church by rotation. Two or three at a time, different Masses, so the household is never seen assembled anywhere Fordham isn't. He thinks there are twenty-two. He has baptismal-name guesses for nine, from communion, from the remittance families, from a Christmas card one of them slipped him two years ago that he has kept in his breviary ever since." Her voice stayed level with visible effort. "This afternoon I'm going to Karama with one of his parish volunteers — the remittance centers, the Filipino groceries, the places where the city's actual heart does its banking. Twenty-two women send money home every month, Vanessa. Money leaves footprints, and the footprints have *names on them*."

"Names on the board by Friday," Vanessa said. "Aiko."

"Two threads." Aiko didn't look up from the paper roll, where she was drawing something that resembled a nervous system. "First: me as bait. I have accepted the panel invitation at the Gulf Longevity Forum and allowed three people to know I am in Dubai over the holidays, which in this town is the same as taking out an advertisement. If Fordham's people are competent — and his neuro division hires from the top of my field, I checked the patent filings, which brings me to thread two — they will reach out within days." Now she looked up. "The patents. Fordham Longevity holds eleven filings in 'behavioral consolidation and habit acquisition' — innocuous language, gym-app language. But the underlying architecture in four of them is Foster's. Not inspired by. *Descended from.* Amy's protocols leaked after Paris — we always suspected the buyer was pharmaceutical. It was not pharmaceutical." She tapped the nervous system on the paper. "Whoever built Fordham's 'lessons' was working from her stolen notebooks. Which means the synchrony we saw at the aquarium has a basement, and the basement has my handwriting in it, one generation removed." Nobody spoke for a moment. Aiko returned to her drawing. "I would like it on the record that I intend to be very polite to these people right up until I am not."

"Noted," Vanessa said. "Jordan."

"I had breakfast at DIFC with Khalid," Jordan said, "who has moved eleven figures for me over the years and has never once asked a question he didn't want the answer to, God bless him — and I let him watch me be rich and frightened of death." He smiled faintly. "It's a specific performance. You complain about your knees. You mention your father's heart, twice, casually. You ask, as a joke, what all this *longevity nonsense* actually costs — and then you don't laugh with the joke, and a man like Khalid, who has watched a hundred fortunes meet their own mortality, hears the silence and knows exactly which phone call to make, because the institute pays a finder's bounty that is itself a state secret." He checked his watch. "By tonight, Fordham Longevity will know that Jordan Harlan — real name, real money, real estate of a man with no heirs he admits to — is in Dubai and asking. The list is the product over there; they'll make me want in. I give it three days."

It took one.

The institute's call came the next morning, velvet and unhurried, offering Mr. Harlan a private consultation between the holidays, *as it happened* a rare opening. The second call came that same afternoon, while Vanessa was standing on the terrace watching the Palm bake — a chief of staff with a Home Counties accent, phoning on behalf of Mr. Elliott Fordham, who found himself, he was embarrassed to say, in sudden need of a miracle of the event-design variety, and who had been told that the one person on Earth capable of producing one in four days was, by some Christmas providence, in Dubai.

Vanessa let the silence cost him three full seconds.

"My waiting list," she said, "is two years long."

"Mr. Fordham," the voice said smoothly, "has never seen a list he couldn't reach the top of."

"No," Vanessa said, looking out at the man-made islands in the man-made haze of the city of versions, "I don't suppose he has. Tell him I'll come look at the venue tomorrow. Tell him I

promise nothing. And tell him —" she smiled at the skyline the smile the family called *load the trucks* — "that if I take this party, it will be the truest thing at it."

She hung up. From the doorway, Jordan watched her with the connecting-door look, the one with two locks on it.

"Both hooks set," he said. "He's reeling us in."

"Mm," Vanessa said. "Won't he be surprised."

Chapter 5

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Five: The Logistics Problem

Fordham Longevity did not have a sign.

It had an inlet. The campus occupied its own private finger of coastline south of the city — Jordan's car was met at an unmarked gate by a man whose suit said *security* and whose watch said *don't ask* — and then a kilometer of drive unspooled through landscaping so disciplined it looked computer-rendered: date palms in formation, white gravel raked like a Zen garden with a defense budget, and at the end of it, the building itself, long and low and blindingly white, marble and glass laid out along the water like a resort that had decided to become a temple. No logo anywhere. When you have to ask what the building is, Jordan understood, you cannot afford what it does.

A woman was waiting on the steps. For one professional heartbeat Jordan's pulse moved — petite, long black hair — but no: this one was sixty, silver-streaked, magnificent, in surgical whites cut like couture, and she came down the steps with her hand out and a Central European accent filed to a fine edge.

"Mr. Harlan. Dr. Ines Vogel — medical director. Welcome to the rest of your life." She said it without irony, which told him everything about the house style. "You'll forgive the theater of the approach. Our members value discretion above all things."

"Above health?"

"Health," Dr. Vogel said, leading him in, "is the discretion. Nothing is more conspicuous than dying."

The lobby was a cathedral with the religion removed and replaced. Triple-height white space, one enormous Anish Kapoor mirror warping the sea light, no reception desk — *names were known here* — and along the far wall, rendered in quiet bronze numerals like a stock ticker designed by a monastery, the thing Aiko had told him to look for: the Board.

Twenty family names — or rather, twenty aliases, call signs, *noms de guerre*: FALCON. MERIDIAN. TORTOISE, which Jordan decided he liked. And beside each, two numbers. Chronological age. And the other one.

"Our members' biological ages," Dr. Vogel said, following his eyes. "Measured quarterly. Methylation clocks, proteomic panels, organ-by-organ. The board is anonymous, and our members discuss nothing else at dinner." A thin smile. "FALCON is seventy-one years old. His heart, as of Tuesday, is forty-four. He has beaten TORTOISE three quarters running and TORTOISE has responded by hiring away FALCON's sleep coach. We do not encourage the rivalry. We also do not discourage it. Competition," she said, "is wonderfully compliant-making."

"It's a leaderboard," Jordan said. "You've turned death into a sport."

"We've turned *aging* into a sport," Dr. Vogel corrected. "Death is a separate department."

She said that without irony too.

The tour ran two hours and Jordan performed his role at championship level — the rich man's skepticism eroding scene by scene into the rich man's hunger — and the strange thing, the thing he'd debrief honestly to the family later, was how little performing it required. The place worked on you. In the plasma suites, recliners faced the sea while machines drew members' blood out of one arm and returned it filtered, separated, *young-adjacent*, through the other — "therapeutic plasma exchange," Vogel narrated, "we remove what accumulates; think of it as oil changes for the bloodstream" — and the men and women in the recliners had the serene smugness of first class at thirty thousand feet. In the reprogramming wing, where the real money lived, Vogel showed him cell cultures in which human skin cells had been coaxed *backward* — partial epigenetic reprogramming, the Yamanaka pathway throttled to reverse age markers without erasing identity — "the cell forgets how old it is," she said, "without forgetting what it is. The forgetting must be partial. Total forgetting is cancer." Jordan looked at the dish and thought about a household across the city, and said nothing with his entire body.

There was a gym where two billionaires he recognized were being made to lunge by trainers with the gentle implacability of nurses. There was a scanning suite that imaged your full body annually and showed you your own death rehearsing — "we find everything early; early, everything is boring" — and a dining room where a chef explained fasting-mimicking cuisine with the solemnity of a man defusing a bomb. The members Jordan passed were uniformly between sixty and ninety, uniformly lean in the new way of the very rich, and they looked at him — thirty-four, unaccompanied, unexplained — with a flicker he eventually identified, with real surprise, as *envy*. He had the one asset on sale here that none of them could buy back at any price. He had time in the original packaging.

The last stop was not on the tour.

They were walking back along the seaward corridor when Jordan saw the door — wide, white, unmarked even by this building's standards of unmarked, with a separate keypad and a separate, colder hum behind it — and did what his cover required, which was to be a man who had never been told no.

"And that?"

Dr. Vogel's stride did not change. "The Annex."

"Which is?"

"For members," she said, "whose subscriptions outlasted their biology." She let him work it out, watching his face with clinical interest while he did. "Cryopreservation, Mr. Harlan. Eleven members, currently, at minus one hundred ninety-six degrees, waiting for the science to catch up to the contract. We consider it neither death nor life. We consider it — " and here, for the first time all morning, Dr. Vogel paused on a word — "*pending*."

"Do you believe it works?"

"I believe," Dr. Vogel said, "that hope, stored at liquid-nitrogen temperatures, keeps indefinitely. Whether the same is true of a person, we will all find out together." She resumed walking. "Mr. Fordham will see you now."

He received Jordan on a terrace at the building's far end, where the marble gave out onto an infinity edge and the Gulf performed its noon impression of beaten silver, and he was somehow both exactly and nothing like the Santa from the aquarium. The beard was the same, silvered and pointed; the build was the same, kept and broad. But the red velvet had been a costume of warmth over something that, in white linen at his own table, did not bother to pretend to temperature at all. He was reading an actual paper book, which he set down without marking his page, and Jordan's first professional observation was that Elliott Fordham had the stillest hands he had ever seen on a living man.

"Mr. Harlan." He did not get up; kings don't. He gestured at the chair opposite. "Sit. You're a puzzle, and I collect those. Vogel's intake says you're thirty-four with the cardiovascular system of a competitive rower, no diagnoses, no family catastrophe except a father's heart you mention slightly too often. Men your age come to me after their first scare. You haven't had one." The eyes were pale and unhurried and they went through Jordan's performance like an auditor through a shell company. "So before we waste a beautiful day on the brochure: what are you actually afraid of?"

And Jordan — who had walked into rooms with mafiosi, intelligence officers, and on one occasion a Renaissance political theorist, and had charmed all of them — understood that the only thing in his repertoire that would survive this man's attention was the thing the family had learned to call truth-as-tradecraft. A real piece of himself, deployed.

"Endings," Jordan said.

Fordham waited.

"I built a life I like very much," Jordan said. "It took me thirty years and it has — let's say it has a small number of people in it without whom it isn't the life. I'm not afraid of dying, particularly. I'm afraid of the *subtraction*. Sitting in the life after the people are out of it." He held the pale eyes. "Your industry sells me more years. What I want to know, before I buy, is whether anyone here has solved the actual problem. Because more years of subtraction isn't a product, Mr. Fordham. It's a sentence."

Something moved in the still face — interest arriving like weather. Fordham picked up the coffee pot himself, an emperor's intimacy, and poured two cups.

"At last," he said. "A serious person."

For an hour, then, two predators sunned themselves on a terrace and took each other's measure, and the conversation was the best Jordan had had with a target in sixteen jobs, which he registered as both an asset and a warning. Fordham's creed, delivered without notes,

was seductive precisely because none of it was stupid: that every generation's moral imagination is bounded by its mortality and calls the boundary *wisdom*; that "natural lifespan" is a number invented by actuaries and worshipped by cowards; that humanity had already doubled it once — "your great-grandfather's natural lifespan was forty-five, Mr. Harlan; do you feel unnatural?" — and that the only honest objection to doubling it again was logistical, and logistics problems have always been solved by men who refused to accept the schedule. He talked about death the way generals talk about an enemy whose supply lines they have studied for decades: with hatred so old it had cooled into expertise.

"And the subtraction problem?" Jordan said. "The people?"

"Is the only problem," Fordham said. "You're right that the industry won't say so. Vogel can give you organs that outlast your mortgage. None of it addresses the actual catastrophe, which is that everything you love is *also* on the schedule." He turned his cup precisely ninety degrees on its saucer, the first unnecessary movement he had made. "I'll tell you what I tell no one on the tour, because you asked the serious question. There are two projects in this building. The public one extends the body. The private one — " the pale eyes came up — "extends *continuity*. What a person is. What they are to you. The part the grave actually takes." He smiled, and it was the Santa smile, warm and proprietary and bottomless. "We'll know each other better before I say more. Come to my party."

"Your party."

"New Year's Eve. My house. Everyone in this city who matters and two hundred people who think they do." He picked his book back up: audience ending. "Bring your event designer."

Jordan's face did absolutely nothing, which took most of what he had. "My—"

"Vanessa Smart. Surveying my ballroom this very hour, I'm told. You arrived in this city four days ago on the same aircraft, you dined at Ossiano at the next table to my Christmas rounds, and you are, my people tell me, *partners* — " he let the word sit, faintly amused, a man who also knew about words that were abbreviations — "of long standing. You see the puzzle from my side, Mr. Harlan: the two most interesting strangers of the season, arriving together, asking after my two favorite subjects — my science and my hospitality — in the same week." The pale eyes were not hostile. They were worse; they were *delighted*. "Either it's a coincidence, or God is finally sending me people worth talking to. I've decided to enjoy finding out which."

"And if it's neither?" Jordan said.

"Then you'll be the most fun I've had in years," Elliott Fordham said, and turned a page. "Happy New Year, Mr. Harlan. Vogel will give you the contract. Your starting biological age, incidentally, is twenty-nine." A beat, dry as the desert behind the glass. "You should tell your partner. I'm told she only recently retired that particular number. She may enjoy knowing it stayed in the family — this time with documentation."

Jordan kept his composure through the corridor, the cathedral lobby, the kilometer of raked gravel, and one full bridge of the highway home. Then he called the war room.

"Two things," he said. "One: we're invited to the party — all of us; he said *bring your designer* like a man moving his own chess pieces, and family, hear me clearly: he has already made us as a unit. Not as Wreckers — there's nothing to make; we're under true names and he can google to his heart's content — but he knows Vanessa and I came in together and he finds us *interesting*, which is both the door opening and the alarm going off, because this one counter-surveils his own dinner guests for entertainment."

"And two?" Vanessa's voice.

Jordan watched the white temple shrink in his mirror, and took a moment, because he wanted to say it exactly right.

"Two. I sat with him an hour. He hates death the way you hate a rival — personally, *strategically*, like it took something of his and he's been planning the counterattack for thirty years. He showed me the frozen people like a man showing you the guest room. And in all of that — " the city rose up glittering ahead of him, version three, lights coming on — "the one moment his hands moved was when he talked about losing *people*. Not dying, Vanessa. Losing. Every fortress this man has built, the plasma, the annex, the household, all of it, is built facing one direction. He's not guarding against death." Jordan changed lanes. "He's guarding against a door that already closed. Find me the woman, and I'll show you the whole man."

A pause on the line. Then Vanessa, quietly, with the sound of the board behind her voice:

"Twenty-nine, hm?"

"That's your takeaway."

"I'm *deeply* fond of this clinic, Jordan."

"Goodbye, Vanessa."

"Tell Dr. Vogel I'm available Tuesdays —"

He hung up on her laughing, alone in his car under the lit needle of the tallest building on Earth, with the rule humming through the silence like a held note, and four days left in the year.

Chapter 6

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Six: The Orangery

The house had a name, although no one used it twice in a row, as though it were too rich for repetition. *Al Firdaus*, the deed said — Paradise — but the city, which renames everything within a season, called it what the helicopter shots had taught it to call it: the Garden.

It sat on the seahorse curl of Jumeirah Bay Island behind walls the color of bone, and from the gate you saw nothing but green — which, in this country, was the loudest possible statement of wealth. Skyscrapers were ordinary here; any consortium could stack glass. But green, *deep* green, hectares of it, lawn and palm and bougainvillea and frangipani and a cathedral avenue of rain trees that had no earthly business surviving a single Gulf summer — that was money burning in public. Every leaf on the property was an immigrant. Every root drank desalinated seawater that cost more than champagne. The Garden was a paradise built in defiance of its own climate, kept alive by infrastructure and will, and Vanessa, riding the silent cart down the avenue with Fordham's chief of staff narrating beside her, understood that she was looking at the man's entire psyche rendered in horticulture: *nothing here would survive a week if the money stopped paying attention*.

"Eleven gardeners," said Mr. Whitcombe, the chief of staff, a smooth pink Home Counties item of perhaps fifty who wore his discretion like regimental colors. "Full time. The roses are flown from Kenya as juveniles and acclimatized in a shade house for a year before planting. Mr. Fordham is fond of saying the garden is his only extravagance."

"Mr. Fordham," Vanessa said, "has an interesting definition of *only*."

"He has an interesting definition of most things, madam. It's rather the point of him."

She gave Whitcombe a second look and filed him under *cleverer than the accent advertises*, which made him useful and dangerous in equal measure.

The ballroom, when they reached it, made her stop walking — professionally, this time, rather than tactically, though with Vanessa the two had long since fused. It was an orangery: a freestanding glass palace at the garden's heart, Victorian in silhouette and utterly contemporary in execution, iron ribs painted white, ten meters to the ridge, the panes so vast and pure that the room seemed roofed with sky. Citrus trees in zinc planters perfumed the corners. Beyond the glass on every side, the garden; beyond the garden, the sea; and beyond the sea, across the water, the entire stacked glitter of the Dubai skyline arranged on the horizon like a city-sized chandelier, waiting to be lit at midnight.

Four hundred guests on New Year's Eve. Four days to build it. Any honest designer would have laughed and left.

"I'll need the room cleared by tonight," Vanessa said, "a rigging survey tomorrow at six, your florist's, caterer's, and lighting contacts within the hour, and a decision from Mr. Fordham on concept by end of day. I don't present options. I present one thing, and it's right."

"He was told you'd say something like that," Whitcombe said, with the ghost of enjoyment. "He's in the garden. He'd like the one thing now."

He was waiting for her by the reflecting pool with secateurs in one hand, deadheading roses himself — a tableau so precisely composed that she awarded it dramaturgical full marks: *the emperor at his humble labors*. In gardening linen, without the Santa velvet and without the institute's white terrace behind him, he was somehow more imposing rather than less, a big silvered man at ease inside his own myth, and his eyes when he turned them on her performed the same audit she'd been warned about, swift and pale and pleased.

"Ms. Smart. My ballroom has four days and you have my full attention. Astonish me."

And Vanessa — who had spent the cart ride assembling the trap, the gift, and the message into a single object, which was her particular genius and the reason her waiting list was two years long — looked at the most beloved man in Dubai and handed him the truest thing she had.

"Pearls," she said.

Fordham's secateurs stopped.

"Everyone who builds a party in this city reaches for gold," Vanessa said. "Gold is the third version of Dubai — the brand, the airport, the skyline across your water there. I'm not interested in the third version. Before the towers, before the oil, this coast had one treasure and the world crossed oceans for it: the natural pearl. Free divers, no tanks, a knife and a nose clip and two minutes of breath, harvesting the only gem on Earth that is *made by a living thing* — made slowly, in the dark, in response to an irritation, one layer of patience at a time. No two alike. Impossible to manufacture, impossible to rush. An empire of them, right here, until the nineteen-thirties — " she watched his face, every grain of it — "when cultured pearls arrived. The perfect copy, on demand, at scale. And the copy didn't just compete with the original, Mr. Fordham. It *extinguished* the trade. This city nearly died of the difference between a real pearl and a manufactured one." She let one beat pass. "Your guests have seen every gold party ever thrown. On New Year's Eve, I'm going to hang the orangery with thirty thousand points of mother-of-pearl light, lay your tables with the silver-grey of the inside of an oyster shell, float a pearling dhow — a real one, I saw four for charter on the Creek this morning — in your reflecting pool, and at midnight, when that skyline across the water lights itself on fire with fireworks, your four hundred guests will be standing inside the only room in Dubai paying tribute to the *original*." She smiled, demure as a blade going back into its sheath. "I promised your office that if I took this party, it would be the truest thing at it. That's the one thing. Yes or no."

For a long moment Elliott Fordham looked at her, and Vanessa stood inside his attention and let it crawl over the concept looking for the knife, and the magnificent, vertiginous fact — the fact she'd bet the whole approach on — was that the knife was in plain sight and he *could not see it*. A man who could detect a counter-surveillance team across a dinner service was blind in exactly one direction, and she had just laid the book's entire argument on his rose path — *the original versus the copy, the living slowness versus the manufactured perfect* — and watched it refract straight through him and come out the other side as decor.

"The pearl banks," Fordham said at last, "were my first investment failure. Nineteen eighty-one. I was twenty-three and tried to revive natural pearling with modern free divers. Lost everything I had, which was four thousand pounds." He resumed deadheading, snip, a rose's spent head dropping. "You're the first person in forty years to pitch me my own grave and make it beautiful. Yes. Obviously, yes. Whitcombe — whatever she wants." The pale eyes came back up with that delight in them, the dangerous delight, the *collector's* delight. "You and Mr. Harlan are the most interesting thing to happen to this city in years. I do hope you're not merely a coincidence."

"Mr. Fordham," Vanessa said truthfully, "we have never once been a coincidence."

He laughed — a real one, big, startling a sunbird out of the bougainvillea — and waved her toward her new empire with the secateurs.

The next three days were production, and production was the one church where Vanessa had never once had to act.

The orangery filled with scaffolds and riggers and Lebanese florists and a lighting designer flown from London who wept briefly, twice, on schedule. The dhow arrived by barge and crane like a visiting dignitary. And threaded through all of it, everywhere, silent and seamless and maddening, was the household.

They worked the event the way they evidently worked everything: as infrastructure. Eight of them on rotation — never assembled all at once, Vanessa noted; *never seen assembled*, Father Anil had said — moving through the chaos in plain dove-grey working uniforms, provisioning crews with water and cold towels before crews knew they wanted them, conjuring a missing extension cable, steaming linens, anticipating. They were spectacularly good. They were the best event staff Vanessa had encountered on five continents, and every time she tried to thank one, or task one, or *know* one, the interaction slid off a surface polished by three years of handbook: a smile, a half-bow, no name, gone.

On the second day she went to Whitcombe and made it professional, because professional was the crowbar that fit this house.

"Your presentation staff. I need names."

"Madam?"

"I'm running forty crew and a four-hundred-guest build in a glass room with rigging overhead. I cue staff by radio, by *name* — it's a safety protocol, it's a liability requirement, and it's how I've run every event since Monte Carlo. 'Excuse me, miss' does not function on a show channel with nine women answering to it."

Whitcombe's pinkness took on a careful neutrality she recognized; the neutrality of a man arriving at a wall he was paid to pretend was a view. "The household staff operate under a… simplified convention. They're all addressed as Holly. The guests find it—"

"I'm not a guest, Mr. Whitcombe. I'm the contractor of record." She let the file sit open between them, mild as milk. "Names, or I cut the household from my crew plan and bring in forty more of my own people, billed through. Your principal asked for the truest thing at his party. True things have *cueing discipline*."

She watched the calculation move behind his regimental eyes — and watched something else move behind the calculation, something that in a less professionally upholstered man might have been relief, as though a door he'd stopped noticing had been tried from the outside for the first time in years.

"I'll send the senior girl to you," Whitcombe said. "She manages the rota. What she's called is, I suppose —" a microscopic pause — "her department."

The senior girl came to the production table at sunset, when the crews were breaking and the orangery stood half-transfigured in the dying light, ribs strung with the first ten thousand points of nacre. She was the template, of course — petite, the hair, the carriage — but older inside the template than the others, Vanessa saw at once; late thirties at least, kept twenty-eight by regimen and order, with steady dark eyes that had been managing things for a long time. She stood at a correct distance and waited, and her stillness was not the wall Maricel had built by hand at the grotto. It was older masonry than that. It was *load-bearing*.

"You asked for names," the woman said. "For the radio."

"For the radio," Vanessa agreed, and made herself exactly as still. "And for nothing else."

The dark eyes worked her over — slowly, thoroughly, with an intelligence that had survived nine years inside a house designed to dissolve it — and Vanessa had been measured by intelligence officers and a Renaissance philosopher and the FBI, and had rarely felt this *inventoried*. Whatever the woman was looking for, she took her time. Out in the garden the sprinklers came on, dusk's million-dirham rain, keeping paradise alive another night.

"The girls on your crew rotation," the woman said at last, "can be Anna, Bituin, Joy, and Len on channel two. That is sufficient for safety." A pause, one breath long, the first unnecessary thing she had done. "I am Rosamie. For cueing."

"Rosamie," Vanessa said, and gave it back to her with the exact weight it had been handed over with — a coin of unknown denomination, accepted at face value. "Vanessa. Channel one."

"I know who you are," Rosamie said. "Everyone in this house knows who you are. You are the woman who is making him a party about the difference between real pearls and cultured ones." The dark eyes did not blink, and the load-bearing stillness did not move, and for two full seconds the entire job balanced on a steel point in a half-lit glass cathedral. "It is a very beautiful theme, madam. I wonder where you got it."

And she bowed, correctly, and walked away down the nave of the orangery, between the citrus trees, under thirty thousand unlit pearls.

"She *made* you?" Linnéa said, at the war room, gleeful and appalled.

"She made the *theme*," Vanessa said. "Which is better and worse. Worse, because the cleverest person in that house is not Elliott Fordham and now we know our work is being read by a professional. Better — " she crossed to the board, uncapped the pen, and under the second silhouette, beside Maricel's name, wrote in her even production hand: *ROSAMIE — senior. 9 yrs. Saw the knife. Didn't tell him.* — "because she saw exactly what I was doing to her master, in his own garden, with his own money." Vanessa capped the pen. "And she decided to mention it to me, alone, instead of to Whitcombe in a corridor. That wasn't a warning, family. That was a *job interview*. She's been running that household for nine years waiting to find out whether anyone would ever try the door, and on the thirtieth of December, somebody finally did."

She stood back and looked at the wall — twenty silhouettes, two names, eighteen blanks, the whole garden of them — while behind her Jordan came to stand close enough that the rule hummed, and not one centimeter closer.

"Tomorrow night," Vanessa said, "we light the pearls."

Chapter 7

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Seven: The Fourth Version

There were three Dubais on the postcards, Vanessa had said on the abra — pearls, oil, glass — but Tatum, by the twenty-ninth of December, had concluded that the count was wrong, the way counts done from boats usually are. There was a fourth version. It didn't photograph from helicopters. It was the version that *ran* the other three.

You found it in Karama.

Twenty minutes and one universe from the orangery, Karama was the city the city was built by: a grid of stubby 1980s apartment blocks the color of old piano keys, laundry semaphoring from balconies, ground floors crammed with typing centers and tailors and cafeterias selling shawarma and thali and pancit under signage in five alphabets. No valets. No infinity edges. The Lamborghinis were two postcodes away; here the traffic was delivery bikes and minibuses with prayer beads swinging from the mirrors, ferrying home the plumbers, nannies, riggers, waiters, nurses, and gardeners — eleven of them Fordham's — who kept paradise watered. Two hundred nationalities lived in this city, and the postcard version was built, cleaned, fed, and raised by the other hundred and ninety-five.

Tatum loved it on sight, with her whole untactical heart, and her guide watched her love it and approved.

"Most madams," said Auntie Letty, "do not come past the Creek."

"I'm not a madam."

"You are wearing two hundred dirhams of sunblock and you say *sorry* to people who bump *you*," Letty said serenely, steering her through the crowd. "In Karama, that is a madam. But you are also carrying my parcels without being asked, so we will see. Come. The shop."

Letty — Leticia Buenaventura Reyes, sixty-three, twenty-six years in Dubai, widow, parish volunteer, and according to Father Anil the closest thing the Filipino community had to an intelligence service of its own — ran a grocery on a Karama corner that was less a shop than an embassy. The shelves were a memory palace of the Philippines: Mama Sita's marinade and sinigang mix, chicharon, dried mangoes, ube everything, sacks of jasmine rice, a freezer of bangus, a wall of prepaid phone cards, and taped beside the till, a faded poster of the Santo Niño gazing out over the cash register with an expression of infinite patience for everyone's arithmetic.

But the back half of the shop was the part that mattered. The back half was boxes.

They were stacked to the ceiling along two walls — sturdy corrugated cartons, each a meter square, printed with the same word in cheerful red: **BALIKBAYAN**.

"You know this word?" Letty asked.

"Tell me anyway."

"*Balik* — to return. *Bayan* — home, country, town. The balikbayan box." Letty laid her hand flat on one, the way you'd touch a piano or a horse. "Every Filipino abroad — every one, madam, the nurse in Toronto and the seaman in Rotterdam and the nanny in Hong Kong — fills these. Months, it takes. You buy one thing at a time, when the salary comes: shampoo, corned beef, school shoes for the nephews, a jacket, chocolate — always too much chocolate, it melts, we send it anyway. You pack it like a prayer, every space filled, and you ship it home by sea, eight weeks, and when it arrives in the province the whole street comes to watch it opened." She patted the carton. "People think we send money home. Money, yes, every month, the remittance — money is duty. But the box is different. The box is — " she searched, found it — "the box is the *hug*. You cannot hold them, so you pack a box the exact size of everything you cannot say."

Tatum stood in the narrow aisle between the towers of other people's love, eight weeks from delivery, and had to look at the Santo Niño for a while.

"Father Anil tells me," Letty said, gently, watching her, "you are asking about the girls from the big house."

"Yes."

"He tells me you are careful people. That you ask nothing that makes danger. That one of them is your friend's friend." The shrewd eyes, which had audited twenty-six years of this city's souls across that till, did to Tatum what Rosamie had done to Vanessa in the orangery, at the same unhurried depth. "I will tell you what I think, madam, and then we will have tea and I will decide what else. I think the big house is a strange place, and I think strange and *bad* are cousins who are not always speaking. The girls are paid like engineers. They are polite like nuns. And they come to my shop two at a time on Sunday after the Mass, with a driver waiting, and they shop fast like the recess is short — " she turned and tapped one of the stacked boxes, and Tatum saw now that this section of the wall was set apart, twelve, fifteen boxes, each carefully labeled — "and *every one of them* keeps a box with me. All year they fill them. They are not allowed deliveries at the house, you understand. Whatever the reason of that rule, the boxes live here." She straightened a label with one finger, maternal, precise. "I am their post office. Also their auntie. Also, on Sundays, for twenty minutes, the only place in this country where somebody calls them by their names."

Tatum looked at the labels.

She was, by the family's gentle consensus, the worst liar among them and the best listener, and she had come to Karama braced for a moral problem: ledgers, remittance records, names harvested off paperwork like fingerprints off a glass. She had already decided, on the drive over, where her line was — *we learn who they are the way you learn anybody, or we don't learn it at all* — and had been fully prepared to go back to the war room with empty hands and that line intact.

She had not been prepared for the wall of hugs to simply *tell* her.

ROWENA SANTOS — ILOILO. JOY MANALASTAS — TARLAC. BITUIN DELA CRUZ — CEBU. ANA MARIE OCAMPO — BULACAN…

"Bituin," Tatum said, very quietly.

"Little star," Letty translated, misreading the tone. "Pretty name, ah? Old-fashioned —"

"Auntie Letty. Three days ago, the senior girl at the house gave our colleague four names to use on the staff radio for the party. Working names, she called them. Anna. Bituin. Joy. Len." Tatum's heart was doing something complicated and enormous. "We thought she invented them."

Letty went still. Then she looked at the wall of boxes, and back at Tatum, and a smile spread across her face slowly, the way dawn takes a province — the smile of a woman watching a chess move arrive from a player she had coached and underestimated.

"*Rosamie*," she said, with proprietary delight. "Nine years I am telling her: someday somebody will come, and you will have only one chance to put something true in their hand, and it must be small enough to look like nothing." She laughed once, soft, and crossed herself at the Santo Niño with brisk affection, business between old colleagues. "She gave your friend the real names, madam. On the *radio*. In front of the English butler. She baptized her own girls right under the man's roof and called it cueing discipline." The smile faded into something older and harder won. "So now you know what I know. The cleverest woman in this city irons napkins on Jumeirah Bay, and she has been packing her own kind of box for nine years, waiting for an address to send it to."

They had the tea. And then Letty Reyes, embassy of the fourth version, decided what else — and for two hours, in the back of the shop between the freezer and the wall of hugs, she gave Tatum the only census of the household that would ever matter. Not surveillance. *Portraiture.* Bituin dela Cruz, Cebu, little star, who bought children's vitamins and school socks in three sizes for nephews she rotated like crops; Joy Manalastas, who was funding a sari-sari store for her parents and asked Letty's advice on inventory like a tiny fierce CEO; Len — Elena — Pascual, the youngest, twenty-five, who sent her box to a *seminary*, because her brother was studying to be a priest and the box was always books, books, instant coffee, and books. Chanthou, the Cambodian girl, who had adopted the balikbayan custom from her Filipina sisters and shipped to Battambang. The two Marias, who were cousins, recruited together, and packed one box between them every quarter, splitting the freight.

And Rowena.

"Rowena Santos," Letty said, and her voice put down its briskness and carried the name with both hands. "Iloilo. Four years in the house. Her box is always the first one full." She reached up and touched the carton — second from the top, labeled in round careful letters — and Tatum saw that taped to its side, where the other boxes had inventory lists, this one had a child's drawing in marker: a stick figure with long black hair, a smaller stick figure, a sun, a box between them with wheels drawn on it as though it could drive itself across the sea. "She has a daughter, madam. Six years old now. Rowena left when the baby was two — the father was no good, the debts were his, and the big house's salary was the only number that could eat those debts before they ate the family." Letty smoothed the drawing's tape with one

thumb, a thing she had clearly done many times before. "Four years she has not held her. The grandmother raises her in Iloilo. Every Sunday Rowena video-calls from the corner there, by the rice, twenty minutes, and I make busy at the till and do not listen, and I hear everything anyway, because the shop is small and love is loud." She looked at Tatum. "The daughter calls her *the lady in the phone*. Rowena told me once — one time only, then never again — that the little one asked the grandmother why the lady in the phone always has the same hair."

The shop bell rang.

Tatum would think about the timing for the rest of her life — God's sense of humor again, or His scheduling — because it was Sunday, the twenty-ninth of December, after the noon Mass, and through the front of the shop, past the phone cards, in plain dove-grey day-dress with a driver idling at the curb, came two women with long black hair.

Letty's hand touched Tatum's wrist once: *stay, be ordinary*. So Tatum became a customer of the fourth version, drifting along the sauces aisle with a basket, while three meters away one of the two women conferred with Letty over freight schedules in rapid Tagalog and the other — and Tatum knew her, knew her before any logic could assemble, by the round careful handwriting she'd just seen on a label — moved through the shop the way you move through a ritual.

She was fast; the recess was short. But Tatum watched Rowena Santos choose, in nine minutes, with absolute concentration: a packet of hair ribbons, red. A coloring book and a box of sixty-four crayons, the big box, the one with the sharpener. Three tins of corned beef. A bag of dried mangoes — then a pause, the arithmetic of weight and freight visible on her face — and a second bag of dried mangoes. School socks. A small folding umbrella, yellow, child-sized, tested twice, open, shut. And from the rack by the till, last, deliberate, the way other people choose jewelry: a single greeting card, blank inside, with a hummingbird on it.

At the counter the two women paid separately, in cash, and Letty packed their purchases not into shopping bags but straight up the stepladder into the boxes on the wall, adding to the cargo, and said something in Tagalog that made them both laugh — quietly, glancing at the door, the recess almost over — and for one unguarded second under the Santo Niño's patient gaze, the costume's smile fell off Rowena Santos's face and the real one came up underneath, and Tatum, holding a jar of marinade she had no use for, witnessed it: the lady in the phone, off camera, paying freight on a hug.

Then the bell rang, the driver had them, and the fourth version closed over the visit like water.

She put the names on the board herself that evening, while the family stood quiet behind her — *BITUIN DELA CRUZ. JOY MANALASTAS. ELENA "LEN" PASCUAL. ANA MARIE OCAMPO. CHANTHOU. ROWENA SANTOS — and a daughter, Iloilo, six* — printing each one slowly, in full, the way Father Anil said them at communion. Seven named now, of twenty-two. Fifteen silhouettes still waiting.

"The working names were real," Vanessa said softly, behind her. "Rosamie was arming us in front of Whitcombe and watching whether we'd notice."

"She'll know by tomorrow night that we noticed," Tatum said. "We answer at the gala — we use the names on the radio like they're nothing, like they've always been nothing, and she'll hear it, and that's the handshake." She capped the pen and stood back from the wall of women. "One more thing, and then I'm going to go call my mother, because I find I need to. Letty asked me a question at the door, and I want it in the record, because it's the standard now. She held my hands and she said: *whatever you people are doing, madam, do it so that the boxes still get sent.*" Tatum turned around, and her eyes were shining the way they did at toasts, and nobody teased her, ever, anymore. "That's the mission, family. Not the wreck. The wreck is the means. We do this so the boxes still get sent — and someday, God willing, so that nobody needs a box at all. So that the hug goes home in person."

On the wall behind her, under the sixth silhouette, the ink dried on *ROWENA SANTOS*, and across the city the orangery stood dark and ready, thirty thousand pearls waiting for midnight, one day left in the year.

Chapter 8

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Eight: The Road Not Refused

The approach, when it came, was flawless, which Aiko took personally.

It arrived on the morning of the thirtieth as a handwritten note on cotton paper, delivered to her hotel with a single white orchid in a stone vase — no logo, no letterhead, exactly the right weight of mystery, the institutional equivalent of a man who knows not to wear cologne. *Dr. Nakamura — your work on associative architectures changed the direction of my life. I believe we are both interested in what a person is made of. Dinner, if you'll forgive the short notice; tomorrow you'll be at the same party as my employer and I'd rather we met before the fireworks. — N. Pierce.*

"She researched how I like to be approached," Aiko reported to the war room, with the flat tone the family had learned to read as its opposite. "Understated, paper, no flattery of my person, flattery of my *work*, a deadline that creates urgency without pressure, and an orchid, because someone told her I keep them." She set the note on the table like evidence. "It is the best-executed recruitment overture I have ever received. I am insulted at how much I admire it."

"N. Pierce," Jordan said, reading. "We have her?"

"Dr. Naomi Pierce." Aiko turned the tablet. A conference photograph: an American woman of about fifty, silver-blonde hair cut like a decision, the build of a distance runner and the gaze of someone who had stopped attending her own press long ago. "Neuroscientist. Twelve years in U.S. defense-adjacent research — the kind with acronyms that dissolve when you look directly at them — then eight years dark. No publications since 2022, which for a mind like hers is not retirement, it is *classification*. She surfaced in Dubai four years ago. Her visa sponsor is a Fordham Longevity subsidiary called — " a pause, one eighth of a second, which from Aiko was a flinch — "Mnemosyne Research DMCC."

"Mnemosyne," Tatum said. "Memory."

"The mother of the Muses," Aiko said. "The Greeks believed all creation begins with her — nothing can be made except out of what is remembered. It is a beautiful name for a research program." She took the tablet back. "It is also, for the record, the name I would expect a man to choose if he believed creating and remembering were the same act. Hold that thought until I confirm it. I dine with Dr. Pierce at eight."

"House rule travels with you," Tatum said quietly.

"Tatum." Aiko looked at her, and for a moment let the flatness open, just to her, just a centimeter. "I was the test population once. The rule does not travel with me. I am where it comes from."

Dr. Pierce had taken a private dining room at the top of the Gate Building, where the financial district arranged itself below the glass like a circuit board at prayer — DIFC at night, the fourth version's paychecks being spent by the third version, towers of lit windows in which, at eight in the evening, half the lights were still on. Aiko approved of the choice the way she'd approved of the orchid: it was the room she would have picked, which was the entire problem with the evening, announced early.

Pierce stood to greet her, shook hands like a colleague rather than a hunter, ordered without performance, and then did the genuinely disarming thing, the thing no recruiter in twenty years had thought of: she put a small device on the table between them, screen up, showing an active acoustic jammer, and said, "For both of us. I'm going to want to say things my employer's lawyers haven't cleared, and I assume you'll want the same. Tonight didn't happen. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Aiko said, and thought: *she is offering me the truth as an amuse-bouche. Note the technique. Survive the technique.*

They talked shop for an hour and it was — there was no professional point in denying it — the best hour of technical conversation Aiko had had since Paris, and the comparison arrived carrying its own knives. Pierce's mind was superb: fast, deep, unsentimental, fluent in exactly the regions of the field where Aiko had spent her life. They argued about engram stability over dessert. They redesigned a flawed Stanford consolidation study on a napkin. Pierce laughed twice, both times at real things. And slowly, expertly, with the patience of a woman reeling in a marlin she respected, she brought the conversation around to the only subject in the room.

"You know what we do," Pierce said. "Some of it. You've read the patents — I would have. 'Behavioral consolidation and habit acquisition.' Gym-app language, lawyer language." She turned her wine by the stem, one rotation. "Here's the language between us. Mnemosyne works on the continuity problem. Not memory *storage* — every fool with a venture fund is doing storage; storage is taxidermy. We work on the thing itself: whether the pattern that constitutes a person — preferences, gait, laughter-timing, the ten thousand habits that make your mother *your mother* — can be characterized rigorously enough to be... maintained. Across degradation. Across, eventually, substrate." The grey eyes came up, level. "You're the only person alive who's worked on the live end of that problem at depth, Dr. Nakamura. The reading and the *writing*. I've spent four years building on the shoulders of work I was never allowed to attribute, and I am sick to death of pretending I don't know whose shoulders."

There it was. Aiko inclined her head one degree and bought a moment with her tea, and inside the stillness ran the calculation she had been running since the orchid: *how much does she know.*

Because here was the architecture of the thing. The world knew Aiko Nakamura, founder, technologist, keynote fixture — the public mind, the safe résumé. The world knew the late Amy Foster's protocols had been the bleeding edge of memory modification before her firm imploded in scandal, and the world knew the notebooks had leaked, because half a dozen labs had spent the years since publishing suspiciously convergent results. What no one knew —

what existed only in a Paris apartment's worth of memories and a locked drawer in Manhattan — was the *annotation layer*. The improvements. The places where Foster's architecture had been corrected, stabilized, made humane and therefore more powerful, by a visiting mind that had signed nothing and kept one device.

So Aiko asked her shibboleth question. She asked it lazily, a colleague's idle curiosity, a flaw she and she alone knew lived in Foster's original consolidation pathway, a flaw with exactly two solutions: the crude one any competent lab would eventually find, and the elegant one that existed in one handwriting in one notebook that had been in the leak.

"Oh, the cascade instability," Pierce said. "Yes. We patched it with the asymmetric gating approach — the elegant one, the one from the marginalia." She said it easily, gratefully, an engineer praising good tools, with no idea she was confessing to receiving stolen goods across a dinner table from their maker. "Whoever wrote those margins, by the way, was the best of all of us. The protocols were brilliant; the *annotations* were wise. I've wanted to buy that person a drink for four years."

"Perhaps they don't drink," Aiko said.

"Then I'd buy them an orchid," said Dr. Pierce, and smiled, and Aiko understood with a long cold clarity that the woman knew, or ninety percent knew, and was offering her the deniability as a courtesy, recruiter to recruit — and that this was the most dangerous person she had sat across from in her life, because Naomi Pierce was not a villain. Naomi Pierce was *her*. Her age plus ten, her field, her gifts, her precision, her orchids — minus one Tuesday in Paris when Aiko had sat in a quiet apartment staring at a headset on a nightstand and decided, at real cost, what her hands were for. Pierce had hit the same fork and taken the funded road. This was dinner with the road not refused.

"The offer," Aiko said. "You've earned the right to make it. Make it."

"Consultancy. Mnemosyne, reporting to me, no one else — Vogel's body shop doesn't touch us. Compensation is whatever you write down; that's not the offer, money is how he expresses *punctuation*." Pierce leaned in, and for the first time all evening the recruiter fell away entirely and what leaned across the table was hungrier and more honest. "The offer is the problem itself. Full access. The instrumentation, the longitudinal data — Dr. Nakamura, I have *behavioral cohort data* no university on Earth could ethically generate, four years deep, beautiful, terrible, and I am drowning in it alone, surrounded by brilliant children who execute and don't *question*." Something crossed the grey eyes — fast, suppressed, real: the first leak in the dam. "Some nights I'd give the whole campus for one colleague senior enough to tell me I'm wrong."

"Wrong about the science?"

The pause was a quarter-second too long.

"Come and see," Pierce said, recruiter again, dam repaired. "After the holiday. Mr. Fordham will want to charm you at the party first — let him; he's good at it; ask him about Mnemosyne and watch his face, it's the only time he's ever fully present." She killed the jammer and signaled for the check, and the world's microphones came back on, and her voice

arrived back inside the lawyer-language like a diver surfacing. "It was a pleasure, Dr. Nakamura. I think you and I could do *historic* work together."

"Dr. Pierce," Aiko said, gathering her coat, keeping her voice exactly as smooth, "I think we already have."

She walked back through DIFC alone, down the glass canyon between the lit towers, past the galleries with their dark expensive art, and let the night audit her.

Behavioral cohort data no university could ethically generate. Four years deep. Beautiful, terrible. Twenty-two women whose synchrony no rehearsal could produce. A program named for the mother of creation by a man who could not tell creating from preserving. And threaded through the basement of all of it, one generation removed, load-bearing: the asymmetric gate, the wise marginalia, the handwriting of a woman who had refused the road and then left the map lying where thieves could find it.

In her suite, she did not turn on the lights. The city did that for her, orange and endless through the glass. She unlocked the equipment case that traveled everywhere and never got used, and took out the headset — *her* headset, the second one, the one with the extra ports, four years asleep in foam — and set it on the table beside Pierce's cotton-paper note, and sat down across from the two of them in the dark, the way you sit across from a chessboard. Or an altar. Or a mirror.

"Very politely," Aiko said to the empty room, "right up until I am not."

Across the water, in a garden on a man-made island, thirty thousand pearls waited for midnight. Tomorrow she would shake the hand of the man who had built a paradise out of her absolution's worst mistake — and he would smile at her, warm as Christmas, delighted as a collector, with no possible way of knowing that the final component of his life's great machine had just been hand-delivered to Dubai by God's own sense of humor, and that it had rules he had never read, and a family he had already invited to the party.

Chapter 9

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Nine: Thirty Thousand Pearls

At 7:40 in the evening on the last day of the year, Vanessa Smart stood at the production desk in the orangery's service wing with a headset on, surveyed the most beautiful room she had ever built, and committed, over channel two, the quietest act of sabotage of her career.

"Bituin, candles at table nine are listing, fix and report. Joy, the chairman of Emirates NBD is allergic to lilies and his wife is allergic to being seated below a sheikha — swap the arrangement and the place cards, you have four minutes. Len, the dhow crew need water run to the pool dock before guests arrive — go now, thank you. Anna, you're on the east doors with me for the opening."

Crisp, bored, logistical. Names deployed the way salt is deployed — invisibly, in everything. Across the glass nave, at her station by the service entrance with a tablet and nine years of stillness, Rosamie heard her own gift come back over the radio conjugated into ordinary working grammar, *like it was nothing, like it had always been nothing* — and looked up, once, across thirty meters of pearl-strung air, and met Vanessa's eyes.

Neither woman nodded. Nodding was for amateurs. Rosamie simply held the look for the length of one breath, then returned to her tablet — and over channel two, her voice arrived calm as tide: "Confirmed, madam. Bituin is on the candles."

And that was the handshake. Two sentences of event logistics, in front of God, Whitcombe, and forty crew. The most heavily defended household in Dubai had just opened diplomatic relations, in clear text, on an open channel, and not one soul listening could have repeated what was said.

"Doors in ninety minutes," Vanessa told the room, and went to put on her dress.

By nine the Garden was drinking.

Four hundred guests came down the rain-tree avenue under lanterns and arrived at a glass cathedral lit from within like something surfaced from a myth — thirty thousand points of mother-of-pearl catching and breaking the light along every rib of the orangery, so the room did not sparkle so much as *gleam*, low and lunar, the way the inside of a shell gleams, the way no gold party in the history of this city had ever once gleamed. The tables wore the grey-silver of nacre and raw silk. The citrus trees wore nothing at all, which beside the rest read as wealth beyond decoration. And in the reflecting pool outside the south doors, lit from below, impossible and serene, floated a true Gulf pearling dhow, sixty years old, its rigging strung with one fine line of light, while around it on the pool's rim sat brass diving weights and nose clips of horn — museum-real, every piece — arranged like relics. Which they were.

Dubai's four hundred arrived braced to be impressed and were, instead, *moved*, which none of them had budgeted for, and the difference made the party. Sheikhs and ministers, the banking aristocracy, two sovereign-fund directors, an astronaut, the better class of influencer penned near the good light; old Emirati families whose grandfathers had actually dived these banks and who stood at the pool rim holding the brass weights with an expression that made their wives go quiet. The chairman of a shipping line was overheard saying *my grandmother strung pearls in Deira* to a woman wearing forty million dirhams of the cultured kind, and the woman looked down at her own throat and had, visibly, a complicated minute.

"You didn't decorate the party," murmured Jordan, materializing at Vanessa's shoulder in black tie, glass in hand, not touching her, conspicuously, legally, "you *armed* it."

"I told him it would be the truest thing here."

"You may have undersold." He nodded fractionally toward the host.

Elliott Fordham held the center of his own gleaming like a man born for the job — white dinner jacket, the silver beard, the pale delighted eyes — and he was *magnificent* tonight, there was no professional point denying it: embracing ministers, charming dowagers, lifting a tiny ancient Emirati pearl merchant practically off his feet with two-handed warmth. And moving through it all, the perfect tide of the household: eight women in column dresses of oyster-grey silk — Vanessa's design, her one quiet insurgency, *no costumes tonight, they dress like the room, they dress like guests* — each wearing, at the wrist, a single band of pearl.

It was 9:54 when Aiko, stationed near the south doors with a glass of untouched champagne, watched one of those pearl bands do something pearls do not do.

The girl was at the edge of a conversational cluster, poised, smiling the costume smile, when her cadence broke — a half-second drift, eyes losing the middle distance, a human moment of fatigue or grief or simple *elsewhere* — and the band at her wrist pulsed. Once. A flicker of light through the nacre shell of it, subtle as a watch notification. The girl's posture realigned. The smile re-set, the drift vanished, and she rotated back into the tide with her cadence restored, all of it inside two seconds, all of it invisible to anyone who hadn't spent thirty years learning to read the difference between behavior and *firmware*.

Aiko set down her champagne very gently.

Haptic units. Wearable reinforcement — the maintenance layer. The lessons weren't history, weren't "weeks at the beginning"; the lessons were *live*, on every wrist, a closed loop running quietly under the silk. The synchrony at the aquarium had a basement, and the basement had a network, and somewhere the network had a console — and the architecture under all of it, she now knew to a moral certainty, had her own handwriting in its foundations, one generation removed.

She was still standing very still when the host arrived at her elbow.

"Dr. Nakamura." Fordham's voice came down warm as a lamp. "The fourth most interesting stranger of my season — and the one I've been saving. Pierce tells me you had the best dinner

of her decade. She doesn't say things like that. She doesn't say things at *all*."

"Dr. Pierce has a remarkable mind."

"Dr. Pierce has the second-best mind I have ever paid for," Fordham said, "and she informs me the best one is standing in my orangery drinking my champagne at the rate of zero. Ask me, Doctor. She told you to ask me — she thinks I don't know she does it; it's her only sentimentality, watching it land." He turned to face her fully, big and silver and gleaming with his party, and there was nothing in his face but pleasure. "Ask me about Mnemosyne."

So she did — "Tell me about Mnemosyne, Mr. Fordham" — and watched, as instructed, and understood immediately why Pierce collected this moment from every new witness like a tax.

The host vanished. Not the warmth — the *performance* of it, the lamp-glow he ran on the ministers and the dowagers, the entire magnificent apparatus of Elliott Fordham at a party, all of it simply stopped, the way a fountain stops, and what stood in its place in a white dinner jacket was the thing Jordan had met for one flickering second on the terrace: a man fully present, fully serious, and very, very old behind the kept face.

"Everyone in this room tonight is dying," Fordham said, conversationally, beneath the band and the four hundred voices. "Every one. The sheikhs, the astronaut, the girl with the followers — pending, all of us, to borrow Vogel's little word. And every philosophy and every faith ever devised has only one actual product, Doctor, one, dressed ten thousand ways: *consolation*. Here is how to hold still while it takes everything." The pale eyes didn't blink. "I have no gift for holding still. So: Mnemosyne. The body, Vogel can stretch — the body is plumbing. But what a person *is* — the pattern, the timing of a laugh, the particular weather of one mind moving through a Tuesday — when that is lost, Doctor, where does it *go*? You've stood closer to the answer than anyone alive. I've read everything attributed to you and several things that weren't." A small pause, precise as Pierce's had been, and as freighted. "I am building a net under the only thing that has ever actually fallen. Come and see whether it holds. That's the entire pitch. Everything else is salary."

And Aiko Nakamura looked up at the man who had bought her stolen absolution and built a basement out of it, who kept twenty-two women's selves in a closed loop under pearl bracelets, who was, beneath the marble and the menace, asking her the same question a Paris nightstand had asked her four years ago — and gave him the answer the job required, which had the additional disadvantage of being true.

"I have spent my whole life," she said, "wanting to see whether it holds."

"January, then," Fordham said, and the fountain switched back on, the lamp-glow, the host, the party pouring back into his face like water finding its level. "Pierce will arrange it. *Wonderful*. Now forgive me — they're about to make me give the toast, and I do hate to keep death waiting."

He said it twinkling. He moved off through his gleaming. Aiko stood with her zero champagne and thought, with cold exactness: *Maricel told us he collects the outside of people. She was wrong. The outside is Vogel's department. He is collecting the inside, and tonight he asked me to hand him the net.*

The toast, at eleven, was brief and the room would quote it for a season.

"Friends." Fordham, on the dhow's gangway of all places, glass high, pearls gleaming behind him to the glass horizon. "Tonight my designer — find her, worship her, you cannot have her — has surrounded us with the memory of what this coast was before any of us improved it. Divers with two minutes of breath, harvesting the only treasure on Earth that cannot be manufactured, cannot be rushed, cannot be faked — made by a living thing, slowly, in the dark, out of injury." He let the room go truly quiet. "The world replaced them with copies, and got richer, and lost something it has never once admitted. So, at the death of another year: no toast to the new, my friends — Dubai toasts the new every night and twice at brunch." The glass rose. "*To the originals.*"

"*To the originals*," roared four hundred voices, moved and gleaming, with no idea on Earth — and at the service door, Rosamie, tablet to her chest; and by the east column, Maricel with a tray; and in three other rooms of the night, Vanessa and Jordan and Aiko, each alone in the crowd — drank to the only sentence at the party its host would never understand he'd said.

Linnéa found her at 11:20, in the staging tent's blind spot behind the orangery's north face, where the floral crew's empty crates made a canyon and the security cameras — per the production plan a certain designer had filed — had a four-meter gap. Ninety seconds, by arrangement of small signals across a long evening: a dropped napkin, a tray rotated, the old Berns backstage grammar that two dancers keep for life.

"You shouldn't," Maricel said, arriving in the dark, tray still in hand, eyes already on the exits. But she'd come.

"Ninety seconds," Linnéa said. "I dance better with a clock anyway. Listen. We heard you, Mari — *you must not fix this*, we heard it, it is written on our wall, I am not here to fix. I am here to tell you three things so that you can decide things, because deciding is the whole point of us, it turns out." She held up one finger. "One. The radio tonight. Bituin, Joy, Len, Anna. You heard."

"I heard." Barely air.

"Rosamie gave and we answered. Whatever happens, that channel now exists." Second finger. "Two. There is a wall in a room across this city with twenty-two spaces on it, and seven names, and a rule above it that says nothing — *nothing* — happens to any of you without that woman's own yes. Not rescue. Not exposure. Nothing unchosen. It is the law of my house now, Mari. I wanted you to know the law existed before you ever need it." Third finger, and here Linnéa's voice, which had kept its cabaret lightness through the first two, dropped into the register Tatum heard maybe twice a year. "Three. In a shop in Karama there is a box with a hummingbird card in it, and a drawing of a lady with long hair taped to the side. We do it so the boxes still get sent. That's the mission statement. A Filipina auntie wrote it; we just work here."

Maricel stood in the crate canyon with her tray, and the party hummed through the glass behind them, and Linnéa watched three years of handbook fight a Stockholm winter and lose ground.

"Rowena's little one starts school in June," Maricel whispered. "Proper school. Uniforms." And then, fast, the gift, the real reason she'd answered the napkin: "Linnéa — January. Listen. Every January the house does *renewal*. Contracts, medicals, and the — refreshers. The lessons again, three days, the headsets — they say it is training, wellness, we sleep so well after, that is what is true and what is terrible, we sleep *so well* —" the tray had begun, very slightly, to shake — "and every January, after, it is harder. To hold the things. Private things. Bituin forgot her own nephews' birthdays last February — laughed about it, said she was getting old. She is twenty-nine. Whatever your wall is going to do, Linnéa, whatever the law of your house decides —" and the costume fell all the way off, ninety seconds in, and the best mover Berns ever hated looked at her old friend with the naked face of the girl who taught her the lift — "*do not let them put January in my head.* That one thing. I am not asking you to fix my life. I am asking you to leave me the parts that hurt. They're *mine*."

A radio crackled somewhere. Footsteps on gravel, passing, gone.

"Clock," Maricel breathed, costume rising again like a tide, tray leveling, three years of masonry rebuilding in real time — and she was already turning, already staff again, when Linnéa said, at her back, very quietly:

"Happy New Year, Maricel Bautista."

The smallest hitch in the step. Then gone, around the canyon of crates, into the gleam.

Vanessa got her own ninety seconds at 11:40, courtesy of a lighting fault she had arranged to need to inspect personally — a service corridor off the orangery's spine that ran, per the architectural drawings she'd absorbed in four days of production, toward the residence: the house's other country, the part no contractor's plan included, where the garden's paths were not lit tonight and the windows stood dark above the party like a held breath.

The corridor ended at a door. Wide, white, unmarked — *the house style*, she thought, *Annex grammar* — with a keypad, and beside the keypad, mounted flush in the wall, a small console cradle holding a rack of slim pearl-shelled bands on charging pins, eight pins, three bands present, lights breathing softly in the dark. The maintenance layer, at rest. Beyond the door, faintly, she could hear — not the party. The party was behind her. Ahead, through the white door, very faint, very far inside the other country: women's voices. Many. Laughing at something, a television maybe, an ordinary Wednesday-night sound, the off-shift household being — whatever they were when the bands were on the pins.

Her hand was still ten centimeters from the keypad when the voice came from behind her, unhurried as tide.

"That corridor is not on your plan, madam."

Rosamie. Alone, tablet at her chest, having followed her — *having expected her* — with nine years of stillness in the dark between them and the party gleaming at the far end of the spine like another planet.

"No," Vanessa agreed, not turning around at once, finishing her look at the breathing lights. "It isn't."

"The fault you came to inspect is in the east transom." A pause,载-bearing. "You repaired it from the desk an hour ago. I watched you do it."

Now Vanessa turned. The two generals regarded each other in the dark corridor, the pearl light breathing between them, and Vanessa made the decision she had been moving toward since a sunset across a production table — the truth, deployed, the only currency this woman had ever once accepted.

"Twenty-two silhouettes," Vanessa said quietly. "Seven names. A rule above them that says their names, their call — each woman her own yes, or nothing moves. Maricel's *no* is on the wall too, and it binds us. I'm not asking you to open that door, Rosamie. I'm telling you what's on the other side of mine."

For a long moment, nothing. The voices laughed again, far inside; the bands breathed on their pins; behind them four hundred people gleamed toward midnight.

"Nine years," Rosamie said at last, "I keep this house. I know what it is and what it is not, better than the man who pays for it. So I will tell you one true thing back, madam, since we are exchanging inventories." She stepped past Vanessa — unhurried — and straightened the band rack by two millimeters, a den mother's reflex, and when she turned, her dark eyes in the breathing light were the oldest thing at the party. "You are building your wall of names from the outside in. But a list of who we are is not the dangerous list." She moved back toward the gleam, tablet to her chest, pausing once at the corridor's mouth, silhouetted against thirty thousand pearls. "When you are ready to be useful, madam — come ask me who we *were going to be*. That is the list he took. Happy New Year. The fireworks are in thirteen minutes, and you'll want to watch the host."

She did. They all did. At 11:58 the orangery's south doors stood wide and four hundred guests spilled out among the lanterns and the rain trees, glasses charged, faces to the sea, where the entire stacked glitter of the third version waited across the black water to set itself alight — and the family, by old habit, drifted to vantage points like sentries: Tatum and Linnéa by the pool where the dhow lay lit; Aiko by the doors, watching wrists; Vanessa and Jordan at the rim of it all, by the rose walk, in the half-dark, a careful ten centimeters apart.

Jordan watched the host.

Fordham stood slightly apart from his own party, at the head of the reflecting pool — alone, for the first time all night, in the one minute when every eye was promised elsewhere — and as the crowd began to chant the year down, *ten, nine,* Jordan watched the pale eyes fix on the skyline and the lips move, very slightly, with the count, and the still hands — the stillest

hands Jordan had ever seen on a living man — close slowly at his sides into fists. Not triumph. Not celebration. Jordan had spent his life reading men in their unguarded second, and he read this one with the cold prickle of a thesis confirming: Elliott Fordham counted down the year the way other men count a magazine's last rounds. *Eight. Seven.* A man doing subtraction. A man for whom every crowd in the world was chanting, gleefully, in unison, the only arithmetic he had ever feared — *how many left, how many left* —

"*Three! Two! One —*"

The skyline detonated. The Burj went up in a column of white fire, the whole crescent of the city answering tower by tower, gold blooming over the black water, and the Garden roared, four hundred voices, and the band crashed into *Auld Lang Syne*, and everywhere — everywhere, by the pool, under the lanterns, against the glass — the world did what the world does at midnight: it kissed. Ministers kissed wives. Strangers kissed strangers. Tatum took Linnéa's face in both hands and kissed her like a verdict, to scattered delighted applause.

And by the rose walk, in the half-dark, ten centimeters apart, the two best home-wreckers on Earth stood with their hands at their sides and did not move.

"Should auld acquaintance," the garden sang.

"Happy New Year, partner," Jordan said quietly, eyes on the burning sky, every line of him level and easy, and only the voice itself, down at the bottom, carrying the freight.

"Happy New Year, partner," Vanessa said, the same, the exact same, and the fireworks lit her face gold and white and gold a

Chapter 10

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Ten: The Other Country

The summons came on the third of January, in channel-two grammar.

It arrived as a production email from the estate office — *Mr. Fordham wishes to discuss a spring commission; site familiarization advised* — which was the cover, and beneath the cover, in the scheduling block, the message: the survey window offered was Friday, 9 a.m. to noon. Friday morning. The one window in the week, Tatum's parish census had established, when the master attended his institute board, Whitcombe took his regimental golf, the drivers rotated, and the Garden belonged — as much as it ever belonged to anyone — to the household.

The house was inviting her. Not the estate office. The *house*.

"Conditions will apply," Aiko predicted, and conditions did. At the white door at the end of the residence corridor — the door with the keypad and the charging rack, the border crossing of the other country — Rosamie was waiting with a small lacquered tray, and on the tray was nothing, because the tray was for what Vanessa would surrender.

"Phone. Watch. The brooch, madam, which has a microphone in it — " not a question; nine years; Vanessa unpinned it without a word and laid it down — "and the survey tablet stays on this side. Whatever you carry out of here today, you carry in here." Rosamie touched her own temple. "That is the protocol. It is also the point."

"Agreed."

"One more condition." The dark eyes were neither warm nor cold; they were *procedural*, which Vanessa was beginning to understand was how this woman expressed enormous things. "It is Friday morning. Friday morning in this house has a custom, and the custom is older than the handbook, because I built it before the handbook and defended it since. You will not observe the custom, madam. Guests observe. In this house, on Friday morning, there are no guests and there is no staff." She keyed the door. "You will *join* it. Or you will come back another day, for the gentleman's spring commission, and we will never speak of lists again."

The door swung into the other country. Warm air came out, eucalyptus and steam.

"What's the custom?" Vanessa asked.

"The bath," said Rosamie, and went in, and Vanessa followed her over the border.

The residence was not what the gossip pages would have invented, and it was worse than anything they could have.

There was no gilt, no silk-rope decadence, none of the haremic upholstery four hundred dinner guests doubtless furnished it with in their imaginations. It was *institutional* — beautifully, expensively institutional, a five-star convent: a long corridor of identical doors, identically spaced, each with a small brass frame holding a card, and on each card, in the same calligraphy, the same word. HOLLY. HOLLY. HOLLY. Twenty-two doors. The doors stood mostly open on rooms the size of good hotel rooms, identically furnished — bed, chair, wardrobe, prayer mat in two, rosary on a hook in five — and Vanessa, walking the corridor at Rosamie's shoulder, read the rooms the way she read everything, and found the insurgency immediately, because the insurgency was the only variation in the country: the *insides of the wardrobe doors*. Open, here and there, and papered — photographs, drawings, a Cebu beach, a graduation, a seminary class in white, a child's marker drawing of a lady with long hair and a sun. The house allowed no personalization where the master might walk. So the women had colonized the one surface in their lives that faced away from him.

Twenty-two rooms with the same name on the door and a different country hidden inside every wardrobe.

"He comes here?" Vanessa asked quietly.

"Twice a year. Inspection, he does not call it inspection. We have forty minutes' warning always — " the ghost of nine years' logistics in her voice — "which is thirty-five more than we need."

The corridor opened into the common room — sofas, the big television, a kitchenette that smelled gloriously of garlic rice in open defiance of Vogel's institute across the water, laughter ringing off the marble before they even turned the corner. Then the laughter met Vanessa and stopped, twenty faces turning — out of uniform, in robes and house dresses, hair down, wrists *bare*, the bands all sleeping on their pins by the white door — and the silence held one beat, two, while the other country decided.

Rosamie said something brief in Tagalog. Vanessa caught one word: her own first name — not *madam*, her *name* — and then a small dark woman in the back, sturdy as a stove, said something rapid in reply that detonated half the room into scandalized laughter, and a younger one yelped "*Ate!*" in protest, and the silence was over, the tide came back in, and Maricel Bautista came forward out of it with her hair loose and her real face on and took both of Vanessa's hands.

"She said," Maricel translated, eyes bright, nodding at the stove-shaped instigator, "'good, the party witch is here, ask her where she buys her shoes.' Welcome, madam, to Friday."

The hammam lay at the residence's heart, and it was the one room in the wing where the money had been allowed to sing: a domed octagon of grey-veined marble, starred with small glass skylights that dropped columns of morning light through the steam, a heated belly-stone in the center the size of a dance floor, channels of running water whispering along the walls.

It was magnificent. It was also, Vanessa understood within thirty seconds of entering it, the most defended place in the emirate — defended not by locks but by custom, the way the back of a wardrobe door is defended: the one room the bands didn't enter, cameras didn't reach, the handbook had never conquered. Rosamie had built Friday morning out of marble and steam and held it for nine years. It was the household's *embassy to itself*.

And Vanessa Smart — who had infiltrated yachts, ministries, the FBI's blind spots, and the Renaissance — surrendered her robe at the door like everyone else, because those were the terms of the only treaty that mattered, and walked into the steam carrying nothing at all.

The first sight stopped her breath, and she let it be stopped, because the sight deserved it.

Through the steam, in the falling columns of light, the household lay and sat and moved across the great warm stone — twenty women, bare, at rest — and the template hit its terrible full power: the same slender lines, the same warm brown, the same black hair loosed and clinging, multiplied across marble in the shifting white air until the eye gave up its census entirely and saw what Elliott Fordham had paid nine years and uncounted millions to manufacture — *one woman*, reflected to infinity, one body dreaming itself across a whole room, Eve in her garden before the count began. It was the aquarium again, it was the corridor of mirrors made flesh and steam, and it was — Vanessa made herself stand in the truth of it — *beautiful*, the way the orangery was beautiful, the way anything is beautiful when enough will and money compress it into a single intention. For three full seconds, standing blind in the steam, she saw the world exactly as the collector saw it.

Then Maricel took her elbow — "the stone is slippery, madam, hold" — and led her in, and the closer view began, and the collector's world came apart in her hands, body by body, the way a forgery comes apart under magnification.

Because skin kept books.

It was that simple, and no protocol had ever been written that could redact it. The template held to the centimeter at dinner-party distance; here, at arm's length, in honest light, every body on the stone was a ledger the handbook couldn't burn. The soles of Maricel's feet, when she folded herself down — hard as horn, the pads ridged and split-healed and split again: fifteen years of dance floors, Stockholm to Manila, written where no inspection looked. The stove-shaped woman — Bituin, little star, *that* was Bituin — had a cook's forearms, old burn-scars laddered pale up the brown, a kitchen biography. A long appendix scar here; there a vaccination moon from a province clinic; the youngest, Len, had a schoolgirl's bicycle scar on her knee and the two Marias had the same crooked left incisor, cousin-identical, laughing at the same moment with the same tooth. Stretch marks, silvered, on more bellies than one. And on the woman lying nearest the light column with her arm across her eyes — small, still, breathing the steam like medicine — low on the abdomen, the unmistakable pale smile of a cesarean scar.

The lady in the phone.

Vanessa looked at the scar where Rowena Santos's daughter had entered the world, six years and a sea away from the marble it lay on now, and then she made herself look at the whole room again, the infinity of one woman — and the trick was gone. It would never work on her

again. There was no Holly on this stone. There had never been a Holly anywhere on Earth. There were twenty bodies keeping twenty sets of books, every scar an entry the house couldn't void, every callus a sworn deposition — *the outside of us*, Maricel had said in the courtyard, *he collects the outside of us*, and she had been wrong, gloriously wrong, and Vanessa would tell her so one day: he had never once succeeded in collecting even that. The outside was the most loyal biographer of all. He had collected a *distance*. Eight meters of party light. That was the entire empire: eight meters.

"You are crying, madam," observed Bituin, with interest, from her bench. "Is the heat. Drink water."

"It's the heat," Vanessa agreed.

"Mm," said Bituin, in the tone of a woman who had raised nephews and recognized weather of all kinds, and shifted along the bench in invitation, and so for an hour the best home-wrecker on Earth sat in the steam in the embassy of the other country and was taught, by committee, in three languages, how to properly scrub her own elbows, while the columns of light moved slowly across the stone like patient sentries and somewhere far above the dome the third version of Dubai went on believing it knew what wealth was.

The tea, afterward, was the point, and Rosamie served it herself.

A small chamber off the hammam — the cool room, robes and wet hair and tin trays of sliced melon, most of the household drifting back toward Friday's other rituals — and at the marble table in the corner: Vanessa, Rosamie, Maricel, and two others Rosamie had kept back with a glance. The first was a quiet Indonesian woman with a stillness very different from Rosamie's — not masonry; *vigilance* — who had positioned herself, Vanessa noted, exactly where she could watch the door and the window at once, and whose eyes had done three slow circuits of Vanessa during the bath without once being caught at it. Trained, or self-trained, or terror-trained. *Dewi*, said the working knowledge from Letty's census. Two years pretending.

The second was the one who had not laughed all morning.

She was, if anything, the closest of all of them to the template — uncannily close, the carriage, the head's angle, a likeness beyond regimen — and she served the tea with a devotion that made the small ceremony faintly liturgical, and when she set Vanessa's glass down their eyes met for the first time, and Vanessa, who had been measured by Fordham and inventoried by Rosamie and audited by Pierce's reputation, met the only pair of eyes in the Garden that looked at her with open, patient, *sorrowful hostility* — the eyes of a believer watching a missionary from a rival god sit down at her family's table.

"Imee," Rosamie said, "the door, please," and the believer inclined her head exactly as the household inclined its head to Fordham, and withdrew, and was certainly, Vanessa thought, listening from the corridor, and Rosamie certainly knew it, and had certainly chosen all of this, every placement, the way she chose everything.

"You came to ask about a list," Rosamie said.

"You offered a list."

"I offered a question. *Who we were going to be.*" Rosamie set down the pot. From the pocket of her robe she brought out a notebook — school-ruled, swollen with damp and years, the cheapest object Vanessa had seen in eleven days in Dubai — and laid one hand flat on it, the way Letty laid a hand on a balikbayan box, and did not yet slide it across. "Nine years I keep this. There are twenty-two entries. It is not names — your wall across the city has names now, and names are the beginning, but a name is only the *address* of a person, madam. This — " the hand pressed flat — "is the cargo. What each girl was going to be, the day before she signed. What she was saving toward. The course half-finished. The man almost married. The fishing boat her father almost bought. The size of the dream, in pesos and rupiah and riel, to the number — I wrote the numbers, I am a housekeeper, numbers are how I pray." The dark eyes came up. "You understand what this book is. It is the inventory of everything in this house that is *pending*. Vogel's little word. The bodies in the man's freezer across the water are pending, eleven of them, waiting for science. My girls are pending too, twenty-two of them, waiting for — " the first hesitation in nine years of stillness — "for what, madam. That is my question to you, before this book crosses this table. The other one, your Swedish one, told Maricel there is a law on your wall. Each woman her own yes. Very good. A yes *to what?* You are not police, you have no warrant; not press, you write nothing; not church, Father Anil vouches but cannot explain you; and you are not buyers, because you have never once asked the price of anything." She leaned back, housekeeper, general, the other country entire. "Friday is over in one hour. Tell me what you people *are*, and tell me the true version, and then we will see about cargo."

The steam room's last warmth stood in the air between them. Beside Rosamie, Maricel had gone very still — this question was hers too, had been hers since a grotto on Christmas Day — and by the window Dewi's vigilance had ceased circling and come to rest, fully, on Vanessa's face.

And Vanessa Smart, who had spent sixteen books being a different true thing to every room she entered, looked around the cool room at the other country — at the ledger of skin she'd been taught to read on the stone, at the swollen notebook of pending lives under the housekeeper's flat hand, at the two women waiting, at the door beyond which a believer listened for her rival god — and understood that the entire job, the wall, the law, the months ahead, the wreck itself, had just arrived at its first true gate, and that the gate would open for exactly one currency, and she had better, at long last, count out what they were.

"We're wreckers," Vanessa said.

Chapter 11

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Eleven: The Believer and the Diver

"We're wreckers," Vanessa said. "I'm going to tell you what that means, and I'm going to tell it the way I'd tell it to God, because you'll know if I don't."

Rosamie's hand stayed flat on the notebook. The cool room waited.

"For four years, the man you've met as Mr. Harlan and I have done one thing, in fourteen cities, and we have never once been paid for it: we end marriages. Deliberately. Surgically. We choose them ourselves — no client, no fee, no flag — and we take them apart." She watched the word *wreckers* land on three faces and did not soften it, because softening it was how you lost this room. "We began for sport. I won't dress that up; you asked for the true version. Two clever, wounded people who had been lied to in their own marriages and developed a taste for demolishing the kind of marriage that is made entirely of lies. We told ourselves every one of them deserved it. Mostly, they did. And somewhere along fourteen cities — slowly, expensively, the way anyone learns anything — the sport turned into something else, because we kept finding the same thing under the rubble." She leaned forward. "Every marriage we ever wrecked was a *performance* that had eaten the performers. Two people trapped inside versions of themselves, serving the version, feeding it their one life. And the demolition — when we did it right, when we did it cleanly — didn't destroy them. It *released* them. We stopped being people who wreck homes a long time ago, Rosamie. We are people who wreck the *false fronts* that get built over homes — over lives — and the test of our work, the only test, is what's standing when the dust settles. If what's standing is freer and truer than what we found: that's the job. That's the whole vocation. There's no word for it, so we kept the rude one. It keeps us honest about what the tools are."

"And here," Rosamie said. "In this house. What is the marriage you have chosen, madam? Because I count one man and no wife."

"You count wrong," Vanessa said. "There's a wife. Her name is Holly."

The cool room went very still. By the window, Dewi's vigilance sharpened to a point. Maricel's lips parted.

"Your employer is married — truly, completely, faithfully married, the most faithful husband I have ever studied — to a woman who does not exist. He built her. He's been building her for nine years out of contracts and centimeters and lessons and one confiscated name, and like every spouse we've ever wrecked, he is trapped inside the marriage too — he just doesn't feel the walls, because his are upholstered." Vanessa laid it out flat on the marble between them, the whole architecture, the way she'd laid it on the terrace for the family. "That is the marriage we came for. Not your home. *Her*. Our job is to seduce Holly out of existence — and Holly, Rosamie, is performed by twenty-two unwilling actresses, which means our job is

twenty-two separate conversations, each ending in a free woman's own decision. So here is the answer to your question — *a yes to what.*" She counted it on her fingers, slow, contractual. "A yes means: your passport, recovered or replaced — we have the means, and the means are legal more often than you'd think and effective always. A yes means an exit that does not look like scandal — no police, no press, no shame trailing you home, a clean professional departure with a reference Whitcombe himself will sign. A yes means the money holds: whatever a woman's family depends on, a foundation we control — it is called the Harlan-Smart Family Fund, it is real, you may have Father Anil's bank verify it — bridges every remittance until she is earning again, not as charity, as *restitution*, paid from the fee we will never charge for this job. And a yes means the cargo." She nodded at the notebook under Rosamie's hand. "The pending life. The course half-finished, the boat, the school, the number in pesos you wrote down like a prayer — funded. Resumed. Not bought, Rosamie — *returned*. He purchased your futures at four times market. We are not the counter-bid. We are the auditors who arrived to inform you the sale was void from the beginning, because the seller never owned the goods. No one can sell who they were going to be."

Silence. The water channels whispered in the hammam behind them. Maricel had pressed the back of one hand to her mouth.

"And a no," Rosamie said. Procedural. Testing the load.

"A no means we were never here. A no means the boxes still get sent — that's our mission statement; a Filipina auntie in Karama wrote it, we just work here — and the woman who says no keeps her job, her salary, her secrets, and our protection anyway, invisible and permanent, free of charge. Maricel said no on Christmas Day." Vanessa looked at her, gently. "She's sitting at this table, inside our entire operation, holding our lives in her hands. *That* is what a no buys, Rosamie. The same thing as a yes: her own way."

Rosamie Reyes-the-housekeeper, general of the other country, looked at Vanessa for a long, long moment — and then looked at Maricel, one raised eyebrow, an entire conference; and Maricel, lowering her hand from her mouth, said something soft in Tagalog, three words, and years later Vanessa would learn what they were — *"Ate. Sha 'yon."* It's her. She's the one.

Rosamie slid the notebook across the marble.

"The nineteenth of January," she said, while Vanessa's hand closed on nine years of pending lives, "is renewal. Contracts, medicals, and the refreshers — three days, the headsets, the sleeping-so-well. Whatever your auditors are going to do, madam, the gate is the nineteenth, because every January the book under your hand gets harder for my girls to remember it belongs to them." She stood, robe and authority, Friday ending around her on schedule. "Sixteen days. Read the cargo manifest. And madam — " at the door she paused, and for one second the masonry opened on something nine years deep and mortally tired — "when you speak to your colleague, the doctor, the one the master is courting — tell her the bands have a master console, and the console has a room, and the room is not in this house. The girls call it the Pearl Room. I have never found it. Nine years." The masonry closed. "Find it before the nineteenth."

Dewi caught her at the border.

Vanessa was three steps from the white door, notebook beneath her robe against her skin, when the Indonesian woman came out of a service alcove with the silence of a held breath — and this close, the vigilance resolved into what it had been all morning: not fear. *Containment*. A pressure-vessel of a woman, small and lean, with eyes that had been doing perimeter checks for so long they'd forgotten other work.

"You will want to know about the bands," Dewi said. No preamble. Her voice was low, accented, fast — a person spending rationed time. "I will tell you what no one else can, and then I will tell you my price. The refreshers do not work on me. They have *never* worked on me — the first January, something in here — " two fingers, hard, against her own temple — "would not take the print. I woke up the same Dewi. I looked at the others, sleeping so well, smiling like — " a small violent gesture — "and I understood in one night that being unchanged was the most dangerous condition in this house. So I learned to *act* the change. Two years, madam. I learned the walk-pattern they install. I learned to let my face reset when the band pulses — I count the pulse, one-one-thousand, and I perform the correction like the others perform it, except theirs is real and mine is theater, every day, every hour, alone." The contained eyes burned. "You sat in the steam this morning and cried at our scars. Very nice. Now hear the thing that does not show on skin: I am the only person in the other country who has been *awake the entire time*. I have memorized the medical wing's rotation, the console cart's serial numbers, the technicians' faces, the sequence of the three days — I am nine years of Rosamie's stillness compressed into two years of acting, and I am telling you, designer, auditor, wrecker, whatever you are — " her hand closed on Vanessa's wrist, the first time any of them had touched her uninvited, and the grip shook, very slightly, the vessel's needle trembling at the red — "*I cannot pass another January.* They re-scan baselines this year — I heard the technicians; new equipment; Pierce's equipment. A real scan will see me. The theater ends on the nineteenth one way or the other. So my price for everything in my head — and what is in my head, madam, will save the others — is this: I go *first*, and I go *before* the nineteenth, and I do not care about clean exits and references, I was going to be a divemaster in Komodo, I held my breath four minutes at seventeen, I will swim out of this country if your foundation cannot fly me." The grip released. The containment slammed back down, perimeter-check, blank face, two years of theater reasserting between one heartbeat and the next as a door opened somewhere down the corridor. "Sixteen days," Dewi breathed, already turning, already staff. "Tell your doctor: the band's pulse interval is one-point-four seconds and the firmware updates on Sunday nights. She will know what that is worth. *Go.*"

Imee was waiting in the garden.

Not lurking — *waiting*, openly, on the path to the service gate, hands folded, the morning sun on her uncannily exact face, and Vanessa understood that this audience too had been scheduled, that everything inside the other country happened on somebody's rota, and that she was now going to hear from the loyal opposition.

"You will not remember which one I am," Imee said. "At the bath I am the one who did not laugh."

"Imee. The one who believes."

Something moved behind the sorrowful eyes — surprise, mastered. "Rosamie talks too much to strangers." She fell into step, escorting Vanessa down the path between the impossible roses, and her voice when it came was not hostile at all, which was far worse; it was *kind*, the patient kindness of the missionary she had every right to mistake Vanessa for. "I know what you are doing, madam. All of it. I have known since the radio at the party — Rosamie thinks her chess is invisible; I have watched her play it for six years; I love her; she is wrong about this." The path turned; the gate appeared ahead, the border of the country. "So I will tell you what no one in the steam this morning told you, because they have decided to want what you are selling, and wanting makes people forget. I will tell you what the house *gave*." She stopped, and turned, and made Vanessa face her among the roses. "Do you know what I was, madam, the day before I signed? Your notebook there says a name and a dream, I am sure. *Imelda. Was going to open a tailoring shop.* Numbers in pesos." The exact face did not move; only the eyes. "Here is what the notebook does not say. I was three years married to a man in Pasay who broke my arm twice and my hearing in one ear once, and I had a debt to people who collect with knives, and I weighed thirty-nine kilos, and I had stopped — " for one instant the liturgical calm hitched — "I had *stopped being anyone*. There was no Imelda left to save. And then an agency, and a contract I read four times because I could not believe the number, and a house where no one has ever raised a voice to me, where I am safe, fed, paid, *needed*, where every morning I know exactly who to be and how, and it holds still, madam, it *holds still* — " her folded hands had come apart; she gathered them back — "and you walk in from your parties and your steam-room tears and you see a cage, because you have never in your soft life needed walls, and you want to take from these women the only thing that ever held still beneath them, and you call it *their own way*. Holly saved my life. Holly is not his fiction, whatever your clever theory says at your clever wall. Holly is the *raft*, and you are the woman swimming out from a yacht to tell drowning people the raft is not real."

The roses breathed their imported perfume. At the gate, twenty meters off, a driver waited with the car that would carry Vanessa back across the border, back to the wall of names, back to the family — and Vanessa stood where she was, and gave Imee what she had given Rosamie, because it was the only currency, even when it cost.

"You're right," she said.

Imee blinked.

"About me — never needing walls — you're right, and I won't pretend otherwise, and I'll carry the steam-room tears remark for a long time, because it landed." Vanessa held the sorrowful eyes. "And you're right that Holly saved your life. I believe you. I've taken apart enough lives to know a true rescue story when I'm standing in one. So here is my whole answer, Imee, and then I'll go: the law on our wall protects *you* most of all. Their names, their call — and your call is Holly. No one will take her from you. Not me, not Rosamie's chess, not whatever the nineteenth becomes. If this house changes — *if* — and twenty-one

women walk out of it, and you stand in the door and choose the raft, then I will personally make sure the raft is still there, funded, safe, on your terms, for as long as you want it. That's not a trick. It's the law." She stepped back, toward the gate, toward the border. "But I'll ask you one question first, and you don't owe me the answer — you owe it to the wardrobe door in your room, whatever's taped inside it. You say the house holds still. The bands, the lessons, the sleeping-so-well." Vanessa opened the gate. "Is it holding still, Imee — or is it holding *you* still? A raft and an anchor feel the same under your hands. The difference only shows when you try to move."

She left her among the roses — exact, unmoving, hands folded, the morning sun on the face that was closest of all to the template — and did not look back, and so did not see what the question did, or didn't, and would not know until the nineteenth which woman she had just armed: the believer, or Fordham.

In the war room that evening, the family stood at the wall in silence while Vanessa printed the new names, and the count went from seven to twenty-two — every silhouette christened, the wall of Hollys gone forever, replaced by a wall of women — and beneath them, on the long table, lay a swollen school notebook nine Januaries old, open to its first ruled page, where a housekeeper's careful hand had written, once, at the top, the dangerous list's true title:

MGA PANGARAP — and beneath it, in English, for whoever someday came: *THE DREAMS. KEEP SAFE.*

"Sixteen days," Vanessa said. "Aiko — the Pearl Room. Find it."

Chapter 12

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Twelve: The Tenant

The invitation said *dinner, the two of us, come hungry and unaccompanied*, and the address was not the Garden and not the institute. The address was a berth at the old dhow wharf on the Creek, and when Jordan arrived at dusk on the eighth of January, he found the pearling dhow from the gala lying against the quay with her deck lamps lit, a table for two laid aft under the great curved stern, and Elliott Fordham standing at the rail in a fisherman's sweater that had certainly never been near a fisherman, watching the abras cross the tide.

"You bought the boat," Jordan said, coming up the gangway.

"I bought the boat the morning of January first, with a hangover and a clarity I haven't had since I was thirty," Fordham said. "Your partner is a witch, incidentally — I sat at that party for six hours inside the only honest thing I've built in years and it took me until the fireworks to understand that I hadn't built it." He shook Jordan's hand in both of his, warm as the Santa suit. "Her crew restored the rigging. There's a man in Deira, eighty years old, whose father dived from this deck — he's teaching my gardeners to sail her, which they find hilarious. Come aft. We're going out to the anchorage; the city is better from a distance, like most beloved things, and I want to be unrecorded tonight, which on land, in my life, is no longer a condition that exists."

They went out as the light died — an actual crew of two, the old man and his grandson, working the lateen sail in a silence that had four hundred years of practice behind it — and anchored off the Creek mouth where the water turned from brass to ink, with the whole stacked blaze of the third version standing on the horizon and the dhow's lamps making a small lit country of the afterdeck. Dinner was simple and serious: grilled hammour, flat bread, dates. And afterward, the whiskey came up from below in a plain wooden box, and Fordham set two glasses down and poured with the ceremony of a man laying out instruments.

"Springbank, 1969," he said. "Bottled the year I was born. I bought every bottle of my vintage I could find on Earth, about thirty years ago. Eleven remain." He held his glass to the lamp, amber, unhurried. "I've been drinking my own year down to zero, Mr. Harlan. I find it concentrates the mind."

"Most men would find it morbid."

"Most men," Fordham said, "are amateurs about death. Sit. I have three things to say to you tonight, and I've ordered them like courses." He sat, the lamp between them, the city burning silently on the water at his back. "First course. I had you investigated. Properly — not Whitcombe's people; the people the people use. You and Ms. Smart both, to the foundations." He sipped. "Would you like to know what they found?"

"I know what they found."

"You're exactly who you say you are." Fordham said it the way other men confess to being lied to. "Real money, really made. Real names, really yours. A foundation that gives quietly and well. A partnership of — they could not establish how many years, which annoyed them — and a pattern of presence in interesting cities at interesting times that resolves, on inspection, into nothing actionable whatsoever. Sealed corners, Mr. Harlan. Both of you have sealed corners — rooms in the house of the life that the inventory can't open." He turned the glass. "Do you know what it is like, at my altitude, to meet people who are *actually what they claim*? I sat across four hundred guests on New Year's Eve. I could write you the true balance sheet of every marriage at every table. This city is a costume ball that forgot it was ever anything else — I should know, I'm wearing one of the better costumes — and into the middle of it walk two people under their own names, with their own money, who ask the serious questions and keep their hands off each other in public with a discipline I have personally witnessed and privately envied." The pale eyes came up, and there was no audit in them tonight; there was something rawer. "I'm sixty-one years old and I have nine hundred acquaintances and, as of the death of a man in Singapore eleven years ago, zero friends. Dying men audit their tables, Mr. Harlan. I've decided you're going to be my friend. I thought it fair to warn you."

"That's the first course?" Jordan said. "What's the second?"

"The second," Fordham said, "is the word *dying*, which you did not flinch at, which I noticed, because you are you. Yes. It's load-bearing." He refilled both glasses, precisely, and for a moment the only sound was the tide working along the old hull. "Eighteen months ago, I began misplacing a specific category of thing. Not keys — keys are nothing, keys are fatigue. *Sequences.* The order of operations in things I have done ten thousand times. Then, twice, last spring: faces. A man I had employed for nine years came into a room and for four seconds — four — he was a well-dressed stranger." The voice did not change at all, which was the most frightening thing on the boat. "Vogel ran me through every machine I own. Then machines I had to buy. The diagnosis has a long name you'd only forget — there's a joke in there; I've decided not to make it — but the architecture of it is this: a progressive, currently unstoppable degradation of exactly the tissue where *I* am kept. The body, Vogel says, is magnificent; my heart will be pumping perfectly long after it's pumping for no one. The tenant goes first, Mr. Harlan. The building stands." He drank. "Best current estimate: two years of being me. Perhaps less. The last year doesn't count, whatever they say; I've toured that year in other people; nobody's home, the staff just haven't been told."

The city burned on the black water. Jordan set his glass down and gave the man what the moment had earned, which was the truth, undeployed.

"I'm sorry," Jordan said. "Not for the death. For the order of it. It's the wrong order."

"It is the *precisely* wrong order," Fordham said, with sudden, terrible energy, leaning forward into the lamp, "and that, my new friend, is the third course, so listen, because I have never said this aloud to a man I wasn't paying. Everyone misreads me. The papers, Vogel, the whole longevity circus — they think I'm afraid of death, the schedule, the void, the standard package. I am not afraid of the void. The void has no contents; fearing it is a category error; I've done the philosophy." His fist had closed, the still hands finally and fully in motion. "What I cannot — what I *will not* — accept, is the *erasure*. Death takes the future, fine,

the future was always speculative inventory. But this thing in my head takes the *past*. It will take Singapore. It will take a particular harbor and a particular voice and the next sixty years of a Tuesday in 1994 that I have kept — *kept*, Mr. Harlan, maintained like a garden, visited like a grave — and it will not even have the decency to take it all at once. It will smudge it. Approximate it. Replace it with a confabulation wearing its clothes, and I will not know the difference, and that — " the fist opened, slowly, deliberately, a man practicing — "that is the only atrocity in the universe I have ever found worth a war. Memory is the only afterlife that verifiably exists. It is the only place the dead actually live. And I am the sole keeper of certain dead, and the keeper has been given two years' notice, and so now, perhaps, you understand what Mnemosyne is, and why the money is infinite, and why Pierce works the hours she works." He sat back. The lamp settled. "I am not building immortality, whatever the brochures imply. I am building an *ark*. Before the flood inside my own skull. Continuity, Mr. Harlan: whether what a person is can be taken out of dying tissue and kept. Not for me — for what I hold. I am the last museum of certain rooms, and the museum is on fire, slowly, and every laboratory I own is a fire brigade."

A dhow went by far off, running lights only, an older Dubai crossing the new one's reflection. Jordan let the silence do a full minute of work, and then he asked it, gently, the question the whole job balanced on, the one direction:

"Who's in the rooms, Elliott?"

The hands went still again. Absolutely still — the practiced stillness, Jordan saw now, the stillness of a man who had learned that his hands answered questions his face had been trained out of answering.

"A harbor," Fordham said at last. "A voice. Tuesday, 1994." The pale eyes went out to the burning city, and the shutter came down with an almost audible weight. "Some museums don't do tours, Mr. Harlan. Even for friends. *Especially* for friends."

"Then I'll ask a different one." Jordan turned his glass a quarter-turn, Fordham's own gesture, returned at par. "The household. Your Hollys. When the two years are up — what happens to them?"

"Ah." And here — this was the moment Jordan would carry back to the war room like a live grenade — Fordham *brightened*, the genuine unclouded brightening of a man asked about the one part of his affairs in perfect order. "Provided for. Completely. It's the cleanest instrument my lawyers have ever drafted: the household continues. In perpetuity. The trust owns the Garden, funds the contracts, maintains the standards — recruitment, presentation, the rota, all of it codified to the centimeter, Whitcombe and then his successors administering. Salaries rise with inflation; the families never feel a tremor." He spread his hands, the gift visible only to him. "Every man at my altitude builds a foundation that mails out grants. I have built something that *keeps*. Long after the tenant is gone, Mr. Harlan — the house stays warm, the garden stays green, and Holly..." he smiled, and the lamp made the smile gentle, and the gentleness was the most monstrous thing Jordan had ever watched arrive on a human face, "...Holly goes on. The one thing the flood cannot touch. You see? Everyone needs one thing the flood cannot touch."

The tide turned under the hull. Out on the horizon the Burj put up its hourly light show, gold chasing gold, the costume ball signaling to itself across the dark — and Jordan Harlan sat on the deck of the last honest boat in Dubai, across a lamp from his new friend, and understood three things in a single vertical drop.

That the wreck now had a deadline inside its deadline — because everything they meant to free had just been deeded, in perpetuity, to a cage that could outlive its keeper.

That Vanessa had called it on the first night, on the terrace, before any of them knew anything: *nobody builds a wife with no inside unless his own inside has something in it he can't look at* — and the something had a harbor in it, and a voice, and a Tuesday.

And that he liked this man. That was the third thing, the one he'd say last and quietest at the debrief, because the family deserved the truth and the truth was a complication: across the lamp sat the dark mirror again — not David Kline this time, not Jordan-without-the-rules, but something nearer and stranger. *Jordan without Vanessa.* A man who had also, once, kept one love at the center of a built life — and then lost the original, and spent the rest of the fortune wallpapering the world with copies rather than sit in the room where she used to be.

"Drink," Fordham said, lifting his glass to the burning city, the year of his birth going down by inches. "To sealed corners, Mr. Harlan."

"To sealed corners," Jordan said, and drank with him, and the dhow swung slowly on her anchor between the two Dubais, the one that made pearls and the one that made copies, while far across the water, in a marble house on a manufactured island, twenty-two women slept eleven days from January.

Chapter 13

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Thirteen: The Gift

The dinner on the tenth of January was the first time Vanessa and Jordan had been inside the Garden together as guests — not contractor, not client, *guests*, a word that in Fordham's vocabulary had begun to glow with the specific warmth he reserved for things he had decided to keep — and it was, for two and a half hours, the best dinner either of them had ever worked.

He cooked. That was the night's first astonishment: Elliott Fordham in a sixty-thousand-dirham kitchen with his sleeves rolled, making hand-cut pasta from a recipe he had extorted, he said, from a widow in Bologna in 1989, while Whitcombe decanted and the household stayed entirely out of sight — *his* doing, they understood later; he had wanted to host them himself, with his hands, a dying man rehearsing the human. He was funny. He was, freed of audience, devastatingly good company. He told the story of losing four thousand pounds to the pearl banks at twenty-three with such self-delight that Vanessa laughed wine into her sinuses, and Jordan — watching his partner and his target laugh at the same joke in the lamplight, the clock under the man's skull ticking where only Jordan could hear it — felt the job do the dangerous thing the good ones always eventually did: grow a heart it would later have to spend.

At eleven, over the last of the 1969, Fordham folded his napkin, looked at them both with enormous fondness, and detonated the evening.

"It's late, the bridge traffic is a horror, and I won't hear of it — you're staying. The east guest wing is made up." He rose, gracious, princely, entirely at ease. "And because you are my friends, and because hospitality in this house means something it no longer means anywhere else on Earth — I've sent you each five of my Hollys for the night."

The room went very quiet in a way that only two people in it could hear.

"They're wonderful company," Fordham went on, warm, unhurried, a man bestowing the best thing in his gift and innocent of every syllable of it. "My guests have always found them so — ask anyone; the Garden's hospitality is spoken of, discreetly, in nine countries. Whatever the evening wants to be, they'll know how to make it. They always do." He smiled the Santa smile, kissed Vanessa's hand, gripped Jordan's shoulder. "Sleep marvelously. Breakfast on the terrace at nine — Vogel has me on a protocol; watching you two eat eggs is the closest I come to sin before noon."

And he went up his own staircase, humming, leaving the two best home-wreckers on Earth standing in the lamplight with the night's true dimensions assembling around them: that the loans were not an aberration but an *institution* — nine countries, *ask anyone*, the proprietary glaze on the gala guests' eyes at last explained — and that refusing the gift outright would close, in one sentence, every door they had spent three weeks opening.

They had four seconds of privacy in the corridor before the household arrived to show them to their wings.

"Rule three," Vanessa murmured.

"Rule three," Jordan agreed.

"All of it. Both senses."

"Vanessa." He looked at her — five meters of marble between them already, the night already pulling them apart toward separate doors and identical tests — and what crossed his face was, of all things on such a night, amusement, the old dark Harlan amusement that had carried them through fourteen cities. "We've just been handed the most defended intelligence target in this emirate, ten of them, for eight unsupervised hours, by their owner, with his blessing. It's Christmas again." The amusement banked itself down to the steel underneath. "Go to work, partner."

The five who came to Jordan's suite arrived in performance.

He heard it before the door opened — a brief silence in the corridor, the sound of five women putting on the night's required selves — and then they entered in the choreography, beautiful, identical, arranged, in silk robes the color of the inside of shells, and fanned out into the room with a fluency that told him exactly how many times this entrance had been made, in this wing, for how many guests, across how many years. Their smiles were flawless. Their eyes were nowhere at all. The eldest of the five — one of the Marias, he thought — began, softly, the opening lines of what was unmistakably a *script*, hospitality's liturgy, *is there anything the gentleman would like* —

"Yes," Jordan said. "There is. One thing."

The room braced invisibly. Five smiles held their positions.

"I'd like to lose money at cards," Jordan said. "I haven't lost properly in years; my partner counts, it's insufferable. Does anyone here play *pusoy dos*?"

Silence. Total. Five statues in shell-colored silk — and then, from the back of the formation, from the small vigilant one he had not yet been introduced to and knew everything about, came a sound like a pressure valve easing one notch: not a laugh, the *ancestor* of a laugh.

"Everyone plays pusoy dos," said Dewi.

It took an hour to get one true syllable, exactly as Vanessa had predicted it would. The first hands were played in performance — graceful losing, hospitable letting-him-win, the script adapting itself to cards with terrifying fluency — until Jordan, methodically, with the patience of a man defusing five separate devices, made the only move that could end the theater: he played *badly* on purpose, got caught at it, and was, by the youngest — Len, twenty-five, the seminarian's sister — actually, audibly, involuntarily *scolded*. ("Sir. *Sir.*

You are holding the two of diamonds. Why are you — sir, that is a *crime*.") The room froze at her lapse. Jordan looked at Len with delight and put the two of diamonds, very deliberately, on the discard pile.

The night broke open like weather.

By one a.m. the suite of the most defended household in the emirate contained: a poker school of escalating viciousness, run for pistachios, at which Jordan Harlan was being systematically ruined by the two Marias, who played as a single distributed organism; a room-service raid he had ordered with grand impunity (*the kitchen reports to the guest, ladies, it's the one law of hotels, and tonight this is a hotel*); Chanthou, asleep across an armchair with her shoes off, the first unscheduled sleep, he suspected, of her year; and Len, mid-tournament, telling the story of her brother's first sermon with both hands and tears of laughter — the syllable become a flood. They did not talk about the house. He did not ask. That was the architecture of the night and they tested it for hours the way you test ice, and it held, and the testing *was* the intelligence: he learned everything from what they checked before laughing, from the half-second every woman spent locating the door when she forgot herself, from the way all five, at two a.m., fell silent at a footstep in the corridor that turned out to be nothing — the whole curriculum of the guest wing written in reflexes.

It was Dewi, of course, who came to the balcony door at three, while the Marias dealt a new hand behind them, and stood beside him looking at the lit sea, and spent her rationed words.

"The report," she said, low. "In the morning. You should know how it works, because it protects you. We file with Rosamie; Rosamie files with Whitcombe; Whitcombe tells the master what the morning wants to hear. Tonight's report will say the gentleman was generous and easily entertained." The ghost of the valve again. "It will not say the gentleman was *kind*, because kind is not a word the handbook has a field for, and what the handbook cannot record — " she looked up at him, contained, burning — "the house cannot punish. We have been reporting around the truth for years, Mr. Harlan. We are very good at the report."

"Eight days," Jordan said quietly. "The boat's arranged. Not a boat — a plane, a real one, a medical charter out of Al Maktoum, papers that say physiotherapy conference. The sixteenth, three days before the scan. Aiko needs you to walk her through the console cart's docking sequence before you go — one hour, tomorrow, Letty's shop, the back room."

Dewi closed her eyes. The pressure vessel stood absolutely still on the balcony of her cage, four minutes of breath in her chest and two years of theater on her face, and when she opened them, the Komodo diver looked out for one full second — the first second of open water.

"The sixteenth," she said, and went back inside, and ruthlessly won eleven pistachios from the Marias.

The five who came to Vanessa's suite arrived in performance too, and Vanessa let the script run for exactly ninety seconds, because she needed to see it — needed to watch Maricel Bautista, who had taught Linnéa lifts and buried her own face under three years of masonry, stand in a doorway in shell-colored silk and offer hospitality's liturgy with her eyes nowhere

at all — needed the full measure of what the guest wing took from them, so that she would never, in any negotiation to come, be tempted to discount it.

Then she said, "Sit down, all of you. Nobody performs in this room tonight. House rule — my house travels with me."

And the night that followed was nothing like Jordan's, because Rosamie — who had personally drawn up both rotas, and whom Vanessa was coming to regard as the finest operational mind she had ever worked a job with or against — had not sent Vanessa five women to be set at ease. She had sent her a *parliament*. Maricel, the no. Bituin, the pragmatist. Joy, the entrepreneur. Rowena, the heart. And Imee — Imee, the believer, the loyal opposition, seated upright in the corner armchair with her hands folded, watching Vanessa the way you watch a fire near a nursery.

So Vanessa did not deal cards. Vanessa convened.

They talked — carefully at first, around the truth in the grammar Dewi had named, then less carefully as the small hours deepened and the room sealed itself in lamplight — about Cebu and Tarlac and Iloilo; about the sari-sari store's inventory problems, which Vanessa, to Joy's open shock, engaged with for forty serious minutes (*your margin is in the load tariff, Joy, not the freight — renegotiate the load tariff*); about the orangery, and the pearls, and what the old Emirati men had looked like holding the diving weights; about nothing; about everything that wasn't the nineteenth. Bituin fell asleep mid-sentence at half past one and was covered with a blanket by committee. And at two a.m. — Vanessa would note the time afterward; the crack came at two exactly, the hour the night watch changes everywhere on Earth — Rowena Santos, who had said the least, who had been turning the same cold cup of tea for an hour, said, to the carpet:

"There is a card in my box at Auntie Letty's. With a bird on it."

The room went still. Imee's folded hands tightened.

"I bought it the week after I came. Four years ago this month. It is for my daughter, for — " the cup turned, turned — "for the day I come home. I have written nothing in it. Four years, madam, I look at it every Sunday and I cannot write in it, because to write in it I must put a *date*, even only in my heart, and there has never — " the voice did not break; it did something worse; it went *flat*, the way water goes flat in a sealed glass — "there has never been a date. The contract renews. The debts are eaten, then the school must be paid, then the roof, then the renewal, then the renewal. I am not weak, madam. I have done four Januaries and I will pass the scan and I can do four more. But on Sunday my daughter asked the grandmother why the lady in the phone always has the same hair, and I heard it through the phone, and I understood — " and here Rowena Santos looked up from the carpet, directly at Vanessa, with the eyes of a woman stepping off the edge of the only world she'd been permitted — "she is starting not to know me. The flood is coming from *both ends*, madam. He pays me to become no one, and the sea makes my baby forget who the no one used to be. So. I am told you are collecting yeses." The cup went down on its saucer with a click like a key turning. "Yes. Me. Rowena Santos, Iloilo. Write the date."

"The date is yours to choose," Vanessa said quietly. "That's the law."

"Then I choose the first date that exists," said Rowena. "And tonight, before I sleep, I am going to borrow a pen."

It was Imee who moved — Imee, who had not spoken in two hours, who rose from the corner armchair, and crossed the lamplight, and the room held its breath because no one, least of all Vanessa, knew which woman was crossing it: the believer, or Fordham's. She stopped in front of Rowena. She looked down at her — at the heart of the household, the first defection, the crack in the raft made flesh — and then Imelda from Pasay, who had been saved by Holly and had argued the raft among the roses with a missionary's patient fury, knelt, and took Rowena's hands, and pressed her forehead to them, once, an old gesture, *mano*, the blessing-touch of the Philippines, the young asking grace of the old — given upside down, the believer asking it of the deserter.

"You will write it in front of me," Imee said, into Rowena's hands. "So that I have seen one person do it. So that I know it can be survived." She lifted her head, and her eyes when they found Vanessa across the lamplight were not hostile and not converted; they were *open*, which was more dangerous than either. "I am not your yes, madam. Understand me. I may never be your yes. But your law said my call is mine — so I am calling one inch of it. I want to *watch*."

The corridor between the east wing's two suites was forty meters of dawn-grey marble, and they met in the middle of it at six, by the unspoken schedule of people who had been listening for each other's doors all night.

Five meters apart. The light coming up pewter through the high windows. Vanessa stood in it with her hair down and last night's earrings in her hand, and Jordan stood in it with his jacket over his shoulder and eleven pistachios in his pocket, and behind each of them lay a suite of sleeping women and the largest single harvest of the job, and between them lay the rule, humming in the empty corridor like the third person in the marriage.

"Tell me it's almost over," Vanessa said.

"It's almost over," Jordan said.

A pause. The pewter light. Forty meters of marble and five of law.

"Lie to me again," Vanessa said. "Slower."

And they walked past each other to breakfast, not touching, four centimeters of January air between his shoulder and hers doing the work that in any other house on Earth would have been done by hands — and neither of them saw, at the far end of the corridor where the service door stood ajar, Rosamie, motionless, with the morning rota against her chest, watching the two of them pass each other like ships under embargo. Rosamie, who had drawn up both rotas; who missed nothing in nine years; who had sent five witnesses into each suite and would have, by eight a.m., ten reports of what the strangers were when the doors were closed and the handbook couldn't see.

She straightened a band on its pin, and went to compile the truth she would never file.

Fordham was wrong about one thing: he managed two sins before noon, and the second was pride.

"*Marvelous*," he kept saying at breakfast, pouring their coffee himself, scanning their faces with frank, fond, terrible innocence for the verdict on his hospitality. "And? The girls looked after you? You slept — forgive me, you both look like you barely slept, which I choose to take as the highest possible review of my house —"

"Elliott," Jordan said. "I'm going to tell you something true, because you collect those."

"It's why you're my friend."

"Your hospitality is the most generous I've ever been offered, and I sent all five of them to bed at three a.m. with my winnings and my thanks, and I slept alone." Jordan held the pale eyes, easily, openly, and laid the cover's keystone with the flattest of hands. "I have a rule."

Fordham went still. The terrace went still with him — the coffee pot suspended, the Gulf glittering behind his silver head — and for three long seconds the pale eyes performed their audit, the deep one, the one that had unmade ministers, traveling from Jordan's face to Vanessa's and back again, reading the sleeplessness, the discipline, the five meters of marble that had walked into breakfast between them and sat down in the sixth chair.

And then Elliott Fordham set down the coffee pot and did the thing that retired, in one stroke, every suspicion he had ever held about the two most interesting strangers of his season: he believed them — not despite the strangeness, but *because* of it, because here at last was a sealed corner he could see the shape of, and the shape was the one thing in the world he had ever wanted.

"A rule," he said softly. "Yes. I knew a man who had one of those." He looked out at the water, and the still hands lay flat and quiet on the white cloth, and when he spoke again it was almost to himself, in the voice from the dhow, the voice with the harbor in it. "Keep it, Mr. Harlan. Whatever it costs — and I can see across this table precisely what it costs — keep it. I had a rule once. One. I broke it for excellent reasons, every one of which I can still recite." He picked the coffee pot back up; the host came back on like the fountain; the morning resumed its costume. "And I have spent thirty years and three fortunes," said the most beloved man in Dubai, smiling at the sea, "furnishing the room where it used to live. More eggs? Vogel says I'm to watch you have them — the protocol is a horror, but a man should keep *some* appointments with appetite."

Chapter 14

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Fourteen: The Voice

The hunt for the Original took the family three days, and afterward each of them would name a different moment as the one where they found her, because each of them was holding a different piece when the pieces became a woman.

Aiko would say the archive. She had started, methodically, from Jordan's four crumbs — *Singapore. A harbor. A voice. Tuesday, 1994* — and from the fifth crumb nobody else had weighted: that the man whose death eleven years ago had cost Fordham his last friendship had died in Singapore too. The friend took six hours to identify: Dr. Goh Beng Huat, cardiologist, Fordham's first business partner from the medical-device years, dead of his own specialty in 2019, eulogized in The Straits Times as *a fixture of the Marina front, who never missed a Sunday at the old hotel lounges*. The lounges took the rest of the night. The Straits Times had digitized a century of itself, and somewhere past three a.m., in the entertainment listings for the second week of December, 1994, between a magician and a visiting Australian jazz trio, Aiko found four lines of agate type and stopped breathing for the length of them.

HARBOURLIGHT ROOM — Nightly except Mon. The hotel is pleased to present, for the festive season, Manila's gift to the season itself: vocalist HOLLY, with the Romy Reyes Trio. 9pm. No cover before 10.

"For the festive season," Aiko said quietly, alone in the lit dark of the war room, to nobody. "*Holly.* It was a stage name. A Christmas booking." She sat back from the screen. "He didn't even rename them after his wife. He renamed them after the *poster*."

Tatum would say the photograph. It surfaced the next morning, deeper in the archive — a Sunday color feature from February 1995, *NIGHTS ON THE QUAY*, hotel-lounge culture at the harbor's edge, and there, in the second photograph, caught mid-song under a spotlight with the band soft behind her: a young woman, petite, in a simple dark dress, long black hair past her shoulder blades, head tilted into the high note with her eyes closed and one hand open at her sternum as if holding the note physically against her heart. Twenty-six years old. The caption gave the stage name only.

Tatum printed it at full size and carried it to the board, and the family assembled behind her in silence, and she pinned it in the empty space at the center of the fan of twenty-two named photographs and silhouettes — and the entire wall *resolved*, instantly, sickeningly, like an optical illusion surrendering: twenty-two variations collapsing into their theme, nine years of recruitment ads with their centimeter-specified heights and ages and hair revealed as what they had always been, a casting call, decades long, for the woman in the spotlight in February 1995.

"There she is," Tatum said softly. "The poster he's been recasting."

Jordan would say the registry. Singapore marriage records, 1996, the eleventh of June: *FORDHAM, Elliott James, British subject, 27 — and VILLANUEVA, Corazon Marisol,

citizen of the Philippines, 28.*

"Corazon," Linnéa said, reading over his shoulder, and laughed once — a single broken note with no comedy in it at all. "Her name. Her actual name. It means *heart*." She looked at the wall, at the spotlight photograph, at the open hand at the sternum. "He married a woman named Heart, billed as Holly, and he kept the billing."

The rest came fast, the way it always did once the true name was in hand. The marriage had lasted sixteen years on paper; the dissolution was filed in 2012, in Singapore, uncontested, with a confidentiality rider that had Fordham's legal fingerprints all over it and a settlement, Jordan estimated from the shell-company residue, in the serious millions — *every peso of which*, they would later learn, had gone into other people's scholarships. After 2012, Corazon Villanueva left Singapore and almost every commercial trace behind her — no recordings, no bookings, no name in lights of any kind, as though the voice had simply been taken home to the Philippines. It was Letty's network that found the rest in a single phone call, because the fourth version's memory was better than any archive: a cousin of a parish volunteer whose choirmaster in Dumaguete had trained under — *ah, you mean Ma'am Cora*. Choir directress. St. Catherine of Alexandria, and the children's choir at two public schools besides. Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental. Sixty-two years old.

Alive. Teaching children to sing, on the boulevard side of a small university city by the sea.

"So," Vanessa said, into the war room's silence, with the whole find laid out on the table like a recovered cargo. "Now the question."

And the question split the family for two hours, the deepest split of the job, deeper than the Christmas terrace — because Jordan, who loved the man a little now and knew him best, argued *hold*: that Corazon Villanueva was the single most powerful munition the job possessed, the only force on Earth that could detonate Elliott Fordham's interior, and that munitions reached for early get expended early; that one whisper reaching Dubai — and Fordham had people, the people the people use — would slam every door before the nineteenth; that you held the queen until the board was ready. And Tatum — Tatum, who had not raised her voice once since Christmas Eve — stood up at the table and put both hands flat on it and said no with a force that startled the room.

"Listen to the sentence you're saying. *Hold her in reserve.* She's not a card, Jordan. She's a sixty-two-year-old choir teacher who got out, who built a life, who does not know that across the ocean a man has spent nine years and a fortune building a *zoo* of the person she used to be — and we are sitting in a room deciding when it's tactically optimal for her to find that out." Her hands were shaking and she let them. "The law on that wall says their names, their call. Tell me why it stops at twenty-two. Tell me why the law covers every woman wearing her face and not the face. She has the *most* call of anyone on Earth — and holding her in reserve, deciding what she gets to know and when, managing her like an asset —" Tatum looked around the table, and finished it quietly, which was how she landed her only knockouts, "— that's not our move, family. That's *his*. That's the whole crime we came to wreck: a man deciding that a woman is a resource that keeps."

The silence afterward had a verdict in it before anyone spoke.

"We go now," Vanessa said. "We go *gently*, we go without one word of what we want from her — because we want nothing from her; that has to be true before we knock or she'll smell it through the door. We tell her what exists. What she does with it is hers — including nothing, including warning him, including slamming the door. Her call, all the way down, even if her call costs us the whole job." She looked at Jordan. "That's the only version of this that isn't him."

Jordan held her eyes for a long moment — the queen's-gambit man, the friend of the dying king — and then nodded, once, all the way.

"Her call," he said. "Go. I'll hold Dubai. And Vanessa — " as she rose — "when you find out what she knows about a Tuesday in 1994, I want it word for word. He's been living in that Tuesday for thirty-six years. Whatever it was, it's the load-bearing wall of everything we're standing in."

Chapter 15

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Fifteen: The Tuesday

Vanessa and Tatum flew the next morning, openly, under their own names, because hiding from Elliott Fordham was the one move guaranteed to wake him.

The geography of the thing had to be understood the way the team had come to understand it overnight, standing at the board: Singapore was the *past* — the Harbourlight Room, the marriage, the registry, all of it thirty-six to eighteen years cold. When Corazon Villanueva signed the divorce papers in 2012, she had done what the fourth version always dreamed of doing and so rarely could: she had gone *home*. Home was the Philippines. Home, specifically, was Dumaguete — a small seaside university city two islands south of anywhere famous, where for eighteen years a woman who had once been billed above a jazz trio in Singapore had been teaching children to sing. The archives had found the singer. Letty's network had found the woman. Nine thousand kilometers separated the two, and Vanessa and Tatum were about to cross them in the middle of a live job, under the eyes of a man who employed the people the people use.

So the cover was no cover at all — it was the truth, scheduled. The Harlan-Smart Family Fund had been financing school music programs for years, verifiably, on three continents, and by the time the plane left Dubai, Tatum had built a Philippine itinerary that would survive any audit: two school visits, a diocese education officer, a scholarship review in Cebu, with one Thursday choir rehearsal in Dumaguete nested inside it like a pearl in a working oyster.

"We assume he's watching," Vanessa said, closing her case. "We always assume he's watching. So we give him something true to watch."

The war room saw them off with its assignments already cut. Jordan held Dubai — held *Fordham*, which had become a standing appointment, dinner or the dhow or the long teasing phone calls of a friendship that was no longer entirely a performance on either side, and which for the next four days had one mission only: keep the king warm, keep the king talking, and notice everything. Linnéa took the sixteenth — the charter paperwork, the medical-conference legend, the quiet logistics of getting a diver to open water — building the exit one verifiable document at a time. And Aiko took the back room of a grocery in Karama, where on Sunday, in the firmware window, a woman who counted pulses for a living would begin teaching her the docking sequence of a console cart: preparation only, materials and calibrations, the slow laying-out of instruments for work that could not begin until the travelers came home. Nobody said the other thing, which was that the family was splitting across an ocean eight days before the nineteenth, and that every hour of the trip was an hour spent from a budget none of them could see the bottom of.

"Bring back the wife," was all Jordan said at the door, and then, quieter, in the voice with the dhow in it: "And listen to her, Vanessa. Whatever she is now — he loved her once, and he's

the loneliest man I've ever worked. There's a version of this where she's the cruelty, not him. Make sure we're not carrying it home in the luggage."

"Word for word," Vanessa promised. "That's the deal."

The hop was three legs and a day: the big jet into Manila at dawn — the bay coming up gold and hazy, a megacity already at full boil — then a domestic terminal that ran on patience and pork buns, then the propeller plane south, two hours over a green archipelago scattered across blue water like a spilled necklace, island after island after island, until Negros put up its volcanic shoulder and Dumaguete arrived through the window as a strip of silver sea-front pinned to the green.

It met them at ground level as the gentlest city either of them had ever worked: a university town the size of a long afternoon, tricycles puttering like sewing machines down streets shaded by hundred-year acacias, students everywhere with the particular unhurry of islands, and along the front, the Rizal Boulevard — a promenade of old trees and older lampposts where the sea came right up to the seawall and the whole town strolled at dusk as a civic art form. They had come fifteen days from an orangery hung with thirty thousand pearls, and the distance could not be measured in kilometers. Here, the evening's grand spectacle was free and ungated: the light going down across the strait, vendors selling roasted corn, somebody's choir practice drifting from an open church door.

Somebody's choir practice.

They heard her before they saw her — that was the truth both of them would tell the family afterward — walking up the side street to St. Catherine's in the gold hour, following directions to a Thursday children's rehearsal. Through the propped doors came thirty young voices working a kundiman in ragged unison, breaking down, starting again — and then, demonstrating the phrase the children kept missing, alone, unaccompanied, one voice.

It was an alto now. Time had moved it down and deepened it, the way time does to rivers. But it filled the stone room to the rafters with effortless, unhurried authority, and held the final note out and out and *out* on one steady open palm of sound — and on the church steps of a small city by the sea, Vanessa Smart and Tatum Angstrom stood rooted with the gooseflesh rising on their arms, listening to the original of everything: the voice a twenty-three-year-old Englishman had walked into off a harbor quay in December 1994 and never, in any meaningful sense, walked out of again.

She saw them before the rehearsal ended — a flick of the eyes over the children's heads, a half-second inventory: two foreign women, expensive shoes, no camera, standing too still. She finished without hurrying one bar. She dismissed the children, who flooded past in a chattering tide. And then Corazon Marisol Villanueva came down the center aisle in the gold light, sixty-two years old, silver running through long black hair she had never cut, more beautiful than the photograph on a war-room wall nine thousand kilometers away in the way a real pearl is more beautiful than a cultured one and for the same reason — the years were *in* her, layer on layer, grown in the dark around an injury, and they shone — and she stopped two pews away, and folded her hands, and was not afraid.

"You're not parents, and you're not from the diocese, and nobody wears shoes like that to Dumaguete for music," she said. The harbor was still in her voice, way down, under thirty-six years. "So before anyone wastes a beautiful evening: which is it, hija? Is Elliott dead — " she read their faces; choir directress; she could hear a held note anywhere — "or is he dying, and somebody finally went looking for the wife?"

She took them home, because that was the kind of woman she had become — or, Vanessa suspected by evening's end, the kind she had been all along, underneath, waiting out the years it took the world to stop renting her.

Home was ten minutes from the church by tricycle, a small concrete-and-wood house behind a riot of bougainvillea, with a mango tree commanding the yard and a piano commanding the front room — an old upright with the varnish worn to bare wood at the left of the keyboard, where generations of hands had braced. She made them sit while she made calamansi juice nobody had asked for, because hospitality in this house was not a service, it was a constitution; and then she sat down across from the two strangers in her front room, under a wall of choir photographs and one framed, sun-faded image of the Santo Niño, folded her hands, and said:

"Now. Tell me how he is dying. Be exact. I have buried a mother, a father, and a husband-in-all-but-paper, hija — exactness is a mercy. It's the vagueness that kills you twice."

So Vanessa was exact. The diagnosis, the architecture of it, the tenant and the building, the two years. Cora listened without moving, her eyes on the middle distance where the worst news is always screened, and when it was done she sat in silence a moment, and then said something neither of them expected, in the voice of a woman correcting a celestial clerical error:

"No. That is the wrong disease." Her hands tightened on each other. "Anything else. His heart — yes; he never used it gently. Any honest disease of an old rich man. But his *memory* —" and she stopped, and looked at her piano, and Vanessa watched a sixty-two-year-old woman do the math of a cruelty so precise it could only have been authored by chance, which is the hardest authorship to forgive. "You don't understand yet. You will. Elliott's memory is not a faculty, hija. It is his *country*. He has been living in it full-time since 1994." She rose and went to the window and stood with her back to them, looking at the mango tree. "And now they tell me the country is sinking. Diyos ko. Even I never wished him that. And I wished him several things."

"Tell us about 1994," Tatum said gently. "If you're willing. We know the public bones — the hotel, the listings, the marriage record. We came nine thousand kilometers for whatever isn't in an archive."

Cora was quiet at the window a while. Then she laughed — softly, suddenly, at something decades away — and came back and sat, and the stiffness had gone out of her, replaced by the storyteller's settling that Vanessa had seen in Letty, in Rosamie, in every woman who had ever held a household together with narrative.

"He came eleven nights in a row before he spoke to me," she said. "I want that on the record, because it tells you the whole man. Eleven nights, the same small table, one whiskey making itself last two sets. Young Englishman, beautiful suit, terrible loneliness — you could see it from the stage; from the stage you see everything; the stage is the only honest mirror in any room. The other men watched *Holly*." She said the name without flinching, the way you say the name of a uniform. "The hotel invented her, you know. I arrived from Manila in November with my own name and my own book of songs, and the entertainment manager — a Swiss; God preserve me from the Swiss — looked at the poster proofs and said, 'Corazon is difficult for the tourists, and it's the festive season. We'll bill you as Holly.' Holly. Like the plastic plant on the bar." A dry little laugh. "Twenty-six years old and nine thousand kilometers from home — you sign what the season requires, hija. Some of you know this, I think." Her eyes touched Vanessa's, shrewd, and moved on. "So. The men watched Holly — Holly in the spotlight, Holly's gowns, Holly's American songbook, *I'll Be Home for Christmas* nine times a night until I dreamed in sleigh bells. But the Englishman at the side table had stopped watching after the first nights. He had started *listening*. There is a difference; performers can taste it across a room. And on the eleventh night he did not approach me. He approached Romy — the bandleader, my pianist, my friend, may he rest — and he asked Romy one question. Not 'is she free after the set.' Not 'what is her room number.' He asked—"

She paused. Thirty-six years on, she paused, and her hand came up, unconscious, and lay flat at her sternum.

"He asked: *'What does she sing when the hotel isn't choosing?'*"

The front room was very quiet. Outside, a tricycle puttered past; the mango leaves moved.

"Romy told him: kundiman. Our songs — the old Tagalog love songs; my mother raised me on them; I carried a book of them like other women carry rosaries, and I never once sang them at the Harbourlight, because the Swiss said the tourists wanted what they knew." Cora's hand stayed at her sternum. "And the Englishman said to Romy — I learned this after; Romy kept it for me like a jewel — *'Then the hotel has been wasting her, and I have been listening to a translation.'* And he paid for one hour of the room. Tuesday. The hotel was dark on Tuesdays — chairs on the tables. He paid the manager for the lights, and Romy for the piano, and he asked — through Romy, even then; he never presumed; whatever else you will learn of him, on that night he did not presume — whether Miss Villanueva would consent to sing one song, her own choice, in her own language, for an audience of one fool who suspected he had been applauding the wrong woman for eleven nights."

"And you consented," Vanessa said.

"I consented." Cora smiled — and the smile was twenty-six and sixty-two at once. "Tuesday, the thirteenth of December, 1994. Chairs on the tables. One Englishman, dead center, hands flat on his knees like a schoolboy. I came in my own dress — that was my condition; if he wanted the real songs he got the real woman — and I sang him *Bituing Marikit*." She let the title stand, then translated, for Tatum: "'Beautiful Star.' Abelardo. The most beautiful thing my country ever wrote, in my opinion, which on this subject is the only opinion in the room. It is a serenade — a man singing up at a star, begging it to come down and light his

poor life. Three minutes. I closed my eyes for the high phrase the way my mother taught me — you give the note your eyes, she said, or it will not believe you — and when I finished, the Englishman was sitting in the empty room with the tears falling off his chin onto his beautiful suit, and he made no move at all to hide them, none, which in an Englishman of that vintage, hija, was a more violent declaration than anything he ever said to me afterward. Including the proposal." She exhaled, slowly, putting the night back in its case. "*That* is your Tuesday. Now you may tell me how you knew there was one."

"He told our partner the disease will take 'a harbor, a voice, and a Tuesday in 1994,'" Vanessa said. "He calls his memory of it the only afterlife that verifiably exists. He's spending three fortunes trying to build an ark for it."

Cora closed her eyes.

"Sixteen years I was married to that," she said. "You must understand both halves or you will get this story wrong, and people getting our story wrong is the one luxury I have never permitted. The first half: it was *real*. He loved me — Corazon, the woman, the difficult name — for years he loved me precisely for everything the spotlight wasn't. He learned Tagalog badly and gloriously. He carried my songbook through nineteen countries. He was funny, hija — nobody will tell you that part now, with his marble palaces; he was the funniest man I ever knew, and the loneliest, and for a long time I was the door out of the loneliness and he was — " she searched, and chose accurately, the singer's ear for the true word — "*rapt*. Sixteen years of being listened to like the Tuesday. Women have stayed for far less." Her eyes opened. "The second half arrived slowly, the way the tide arrives — no wave you can point to. I turned forty. Then forty-three. The voice deepened — it does; it is supposed to; a voice is a river, not a recording. And I began to catch him *grieving*. Not for anything. At dinner. At the mirror behind me. This man with his still hands, watching me laugh at forty-five, and behind his eyes something in mourning dress." Her jaw set. "He never said *be younger*. I want that exact; he was never once vulgar; vulgarity would have been survivable. What he said was — *stay*. 'Stay as you are.' As if time were a door I was choosing to walk through out of carelessness. As if every grey hair were a small disloyalty to the Tuesday."

"He told Jordan he had a rule once," Vanessa said quietly. "And broke it for excellent reasons."

"Ah." Cora's smile went thin as wire. "So he remembers it as *his* rule now. Of course. He has had thirty years to renovate." She stood again — this part required the window — and addressed it to the mango tree. "The rule was mine, and I set it before I accepted him, on the harbor, with witnesses of gull. I knew what he was by then — a man who improves things; it was his gift and his fortune and I had watched him do it to companies and buildings and his own body. So I made him promise, and I made it simple so it could not be lawyered: *'You will never manage me. I am not one of your projects. The day you try to improve me is the day I am gone.'* And he wept — he was a great weeper in private, my Elliott; it was the best thing in him — and he promised. And for sixteen years, hija, to be exact, because exactness is a mercy: he kept it." She turned from the window. "And then in March of 2012, I was looking in his study for the spare reading glasses, and I found the dossier."

Neither of them breathed.

"Bound. *Bound*, like a company prospectus, with a cover page. A clinic in Zürich, a clinic in Seoul, a — what is the English — a *roadmap*. Eighteen months, four phases. My face, photographed without my knowledge at some dinner, with the surgeon's pencil lines already drawn on it like a property survey. Hormonal protocols. A voice specialist — for the *voice*, hija; they had a plan to chase my voice back up the river. And on the cover, in his own hand, the title." She recited it without inflection, each word laid down like evidence. "*Project Harbourlight. Restoration estimate: C., age 28.*"

The front room held still. Somewhere down the street, children were playing a shrieking game in the last of the light.

"Restoration," Cora repeated softly. "Like a painting. Like the dhow he doubtless owns by now — he owns one, yes? I see your faces. Of course he does." She came back and sat, and the anger, which had risen in her like weather, passed through and out of her with the discipline of four decades of breath control. "I did not scream. I am proud of that. I put the dossier back, and I sang at his foundation dinner that Friday — beautifully; my last performance; I chose the program myself — and on the Monday I flew home. And on the Tuesday, hija — *on the Tuesday*, because I also know how to keep an anniversary — my lawyer in Cebu filed the papers. He called me eleven times. I answered once, the last time, and he said — God forgive him, he had no idea even then; that is what you must understand about Elliott, the cruelty arrives gift-wrapped and he *believes the wrapping* — he said: 'Cora. I was only trying to save you.' 'From *what*,' I asked him. And he said — exact words; they are engraved where I keep such things — *'From becoming someone the Tuesday wouldn't recognize.'*"

"And you said?" Tatum whispered.

"I said: 'Elliott. The Tuesday was never the song. The Tuesday was that you wanted to hear what I would *become*.' And I put down the telephone, and that," said Corazon Villanueva, "was the last time my husband and I ever spoke."

They told her everything after that, because she had paid for it.

They told her about the household with the lights coming on in the street outside — the agency advertisements with their centimeter specifications, and she went very still when Vanessa read the numbers off her phone and said, barely aloud, *"those are my measurements; he kept my measurements"* — and about the name, all twenty-two of them answering to the plastic plant on the bar; and about the bands, and the lessons, and the white door, and the wardrobe doors' hidden countries; and the names, every one — at *Bituin* Cora made a small wounded sound, the coincidence of the star landing on her like a hand — and Rowena, and the daughter in Iloilo who asks why the lady in the phone always has the same hair.

When it was finished, Cora sat for a long time with her hand at her sternum.

"He built a *choir* of me," she said finally, wonderingl

Chapter 16

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Sixteen: The Un-Making

The back room of Letty's grocery in Karama smelled of cardboard and dried mango and the particular dust that collects on things that are kept rather than used, and it was, Aiko decided on the first morning, the most honest room she had worked in years.

It had been a stockroom and a chapel and a wake hall and a remittance office, and on Sundays for twenty-six years it had been the one address in Dubai where two dozen women from three countries could put down a box, and a name, and the weight of pretending, for twenty minutes at a time. Letty had cleared the long table herself — *for the doktora*, she called Aiko, having decided this on no evidence and refusing to be moved off it — stacking the half-packed balikbayan boxes against the wall in a wainscot of brown tape and felt-pen Tagalog, *FRAGILE, FOR MAMA, DO NOT OPEN UNTIL CHRISTMAS THIS MEANS YOU TITO BOY*. Under that wall, on green oilcloth, Aiko laid out the headset.

It came out of the foam slowly. She had carried it through nine countries and never assembled it; it had lived in its case the way a violin lives in an attic, an instrument no one in the house will admit they can hear. She set the crown band, and the temple leads, and the small grey unit with her own initials scratched into the underside in a hand she no longer recognized as belonging to her, and she sat for a moment with her palms flat on the oilcloth on either side of it, not touching, the way the Englishman in Cora's story had sat with his hands flat on his knees like a schoolboy, waiting to find out whether he had been applauding the wrong woman.

"You stalled," said Dewi, from the doorway. "I watched you. You laid it out and then you counted to — what. Eight."

"Eleven," Aiko said, and surprised herself, because she had not known she was counting until she was caught at it. "It's a thing I do before the part that can't be taken back."

"I know it is." Dewi came in and sat across the table, folding herself onto the stool with the economy of a person who had spent two years making every movement smaller than it wanted to be. She was twenty-nine and looked, like all of them, twenty-five, and unlike all of them she looked it on purpose, having long ago calculated that the surveillance read stillness as compliance and so had given it nothing but stillness to read. "The pulse is one-point-four seconds. You learn to live inside the gap. You count the gap, not the beat — the beat is theirs, the gap is yours." She held up her wrist, bare now, pale where the band had ridden for two years. "Four hundred and twelve days I counted the gap. You want to know the longest I ever held my breath underwater, before all this?"

"Cora's network said four minutes."

"Four minutes ten. At seventeen, in Komodo, with a divemaster watching to fail me." Dewi smiled, and it was the first wholly unguarded thing Aiko had seen from any of them. "Same

skill. You find the place where the panic lives and you build a small room next to it and you go and sit in the small room. That's all conditioning is, *Doktora*. They build the panic. You build the room next door." She nodded at the headset. "That's what you build, isn't it. Rooms next door."

Aiko looked at her for a long moment — at this woman the system had failed to write on, who had read the system back to itself in the dark for two years and corrected its grammar — and felt something turn over in her chest that she would later name, to Vanessa, as *recognition in the wrong direction*: the vertigo of meeting the person you might have been if your gifts had been spent under a different roof.

"They told me you'd teach me the cart," Aiko said.

"I'll teach you the cart." Dewi pulled the stool closer. "But the cart is the easy half. The hard half is the lie. You can't just stop the refresher — they log the session, they check the log, Pierce's new box on the nineteenth re-scans the baselines and a clean head reads as a problem the way a sealed corner reads as suspicious to a man with no friends. You can't give them nothing. You have to give them a *yes* they'll believe." She tapped the grey unit, once, with a fingernail bitten to the quick. "You have to teach this to lie convincingly. Can it?"

"It's the only thing I ever taught it," Aiko said. "I just taught it to lie in the wrong direction."

The cart, when Rosamie wheeled it in on the second Sunday under a tarpaulin and a crate of San Miguel, was uglier than the empire that owned it — a scuffed grey console on locking casters, the kind of thing that lives in the back of clinics, with a docking spine along one edge where the bands seated to charge and update, eight pins to a rail.

"It comes to the white door Sunday nights," Dewi said, "for the firmware. That's the window. The bands go onto the rail, the rail goes quiet, the new instructions come down the wire from the Pearl Room — wherever the Pearl Room is; nine years and nobody's found it — and for forty minutes the live layer is *asleep*. Forty minutes a week, the only forty minutes we are ever not corrected." She seated a band on the rail and it woke with a small green breath of light. "You dock it like this. The serial has to match the manifest or the rail flags a foreign unit. Memorize the manifest. I made you the manifest." She slid a folded sheet across — a child's exercise-book page, blue lines, columns of numbers in a tiny disciplined hand. "I have been making you this manifest for two years, *Doktora*. I just didn't know your name yet."

Aiko took the page and did not trust herself to speak for a moment.

"Why didn't you run?" she asked finally. "Your conditioning never took. You knew the rotations, the serials, the firmware nights. You could have walked off the gala dhow into the harbor and been a divemaster in Komodo by spring."

Dewi seated another band, watched it breathe green.

"Because of the ones it *did* take," she said. "If I run, Pierce re-scans, finds the gap where I used to be, and tightens everything for everyone the way you tighten a net after one fish gets

through. I'd have my open water and Bituin would lose the last of her nephews. So I stayed in the small room next to the panic and I counted the gap and I waited for someone to come who could fix the *net* and not just cut one hole in it." She looked up. "Your friend Vanessa keeps asking Imee — raft or anchor. It's the wrong question for me. I was the only one who could see the whole net. That's not a raft and it's not an anchor. That's a *witness*. You don't get to leave while you're the witness." A beat. "Now you're here. Now I can be just a girl who likes to hold her breath. Teach me nothing else; teach the *cart* everything; and on the sixteenth, let me go be a diver, and let the net be your problem." She seated the last band. The rail glowed full, eight green breaths in a row, a constellation laid on its side. "That's my price, by the way. In case anyone's keeping the ledger. I go first, and I go *clean* — no lessons in my head to lift, because they never put any in. I just want the wrist back."

"You'll get the wrist back," Aiko said.

"I know," Dewi said. "I read your margins."

Aiko went very still.

"Pierce's people leave things on the cart they shouldn't," Dewi said, almost gently, watching her. "Service notes. Source comments. Two years ago I'm faking a correction at three in the morning and I'm reading the comment block in the firmware, because what else is there to do at three in the morning in a small room, and there's a line of someone else's reasoning in there — an old line, copied and copied, the way a recipe gets copied until nobody remembers whose lola wrote it. About gates. About how the gate that closes a memory is *asymmetric* — cheaper to shut than to open, and the shutting leaves a seam. And I thought: whoever wrote that understood this better than the people using it, and they wrote it to *help* someone, you could feel it, it was written warm." Dewi tilted her head. "It was you. It was your seam. They're suppressing these women with your handwriting, *Doktora*. I've known that longer than I've known your face."

The boxes against the wall ticked faintly in the rising heat. *DO NOT OPEN UNTIL CHRISTMAS.*

"Yes," Aiko said. It was the first time she had said it out loud to anyone but Vanessa. "It was me."

She did not sleep that night, in the apartment off Oud Metha, and at four she gave up pretending and sat by the window with the grey unit in her lap and the city throwing its sodium light up against the underside of the haze, and she let herself go back to the room where it had been taken.

Paris. The lab off the Rue d'Ulm, the year she was the youngest in it and the best in it and too grateful to be either to ask why the funding never had a face. She had been a *target* before she ever knew the word — she understood that now, had understood it the day she joined the family and Vanessa had named the thing she'd survived without naming it as rescue: that a person could be wrecked not by force but by being *seen accurately and then spent*, her gift drawn out of her like a thread off a spool by people who admired the thread and had no

interest whatsoever in the spool. She had written her marginalia in the warm half of the night, in the margins of the Foster protocols, the asymmetric gating, the seam — she had written it to make the work *kinder*, to find the version of memory science that healed the soldier and the grieving without hollowing the person, *whoever wrote those margins was the best of all of us*, Pierce had said it to her own face at the Gate Building four years and one life later, ninety percent knowing, offering deniability like a man holding a door.

And the work had been taken. Not stolen in the night — *taken*, the way Fordham took everything, in daylight, with paperwork, the spool discarded and the thread run through machines until it came out the far end as eight green breaths on a charging rail and a woman in Cebu who could no longer find her nephews' birthdays. Her own seam, run backward. Her warmth, weaponized into a wall. She had spent eleven years not assembling the headset because to assemble it was to admit that the kindest thing she had ever made was now the instrument of the cruelty she had spent her freedom hunting, and that the two facts had the same handwriting.

Pierce had taken the funded road and was drowning on it alone, wanting only a colleague senior enough to tell her she was wrong. Dewi had been written on by the system and out-read it from inside. And Aiko sat between them, the woman whose hand was on the wall and whose hand could open it, and the thing she understood at four in the morning with the haze going pearl-grey over the Creek was that this was not, in the end, about absolution. The seam did not care that she was sorry. The seam was just true: she had built a gate that opened, and they had only ever run it shut.

She could run it the other way.

"You built it warm," she said aloud, to the unit, to Paris, to the girl who had scratched her initials into the grey. "Let's see if it remembers how."

They brought Bituin on the third Sunday, in the back of Letty's rotation, twenty minutes nested inside the box visit so that the manifest would show nothing but a woman packing dried fish for her sister.

Aiko had not wanted a first subject who carried much to lift; Rosamie had overruled her with the flat certainty of a general who has waited nine years for the order to advance. "Bituin," she said. "It has to be Bituin. She's the one who started forgetting the things that were *hers* and not theirs — last February she couldn't find her boys' birthdays, three boys, her sister's sons, and she has cooked for this house for six years and never once burned a thing, and she came back from the box that Sunday and stood in the kitchen and could not remember whether the eldest was an October baby or a June, and she cried into the *adobo* so the salt wouldn't show, and she said to me, *Ate, I think I am getting old fast.*" Rosamie's voice did not change at all, which was how Aiko had learned to know when the household's general was at the edge of something. "She is forty-one. She is not getting old fast. Lift it. Let her be the first one who finds out the difference. The rest of them need to see it on a face they trust before they'll sit in your chair."

So Bituin sat in the chair — a kitchen chair, in a stockroom, under a wall of boxes — with her cook's hands in her lap, the burn-scars climbing the backs of them like little ladders, and she was frightened in the particular way of someone who has been taught that the inside of her own head is a place that gets *adjusted*, and Aiko did the kindest thing the work had ever let her do, which was to tell her the truth.

"I'm not going to put anything in," Aiko said, settling the crown band, her hands steady now, the eleven counted and done. "That's what they do. I'm going to take the wall down off something that's already in there. You won't feel me add a single thing. You might feel the wall come down." She met Bituin's eyes. "It may come down all at once. Hold the chair."

"What's behind it?" Bituin whispered.

"Yours," Aiko said. "Only ever yours."

She found the seam the way you find the edge of tape in the dark, by feel, by the place where the smoothness changes — the gate her own hand had drawn the schematic of in a Paris half-night, run shut now eleven times by people who had never read the warm half of the comment, eleven Januaries of it, a wall built and rebuilt by hand over a doorway. And she put the signal along the seam, gently, asymmetric, opening what was cheaper to close, and she watched the small grey unit report a flawless successful refresh to a console that would log it and a re-scan that would believe it — *the headset lying convincingly, in the right direction at last* — and behind the wall, in Bituin dela Cruz, something that had been pressed flat for a year stood up.

Bituin made a sound that was not a word.

Then she made the words. "Boyet," she said, and her scarred hands came up off her lap and pressed flat against her own sternum, the household's involuntary gesture, the open hand of a woman on a poster in 1995, except that this woman was holding something *in*, not out. "Boyet — the *fourth* of October. He's the oldest, he's nine, he was born the fourth of October during the storm, my sister walked to the highway in the rain — the *fourth* —" Her face was doing two things at once, the two things Aiko would carry out of that room for the rest of her life: it was weeping, and it was *laughing*, the whole architecture of grief running in reverse like the gate, like the river time deepens, water finding its old bed. "And Junmar, the middle one, he is — *January, the twenty-second*, he came early, so small, we lit a candle — the twenty-second of January — and the baby, the baby, Migoy, *Miguelito*, the thirtieth of *June*, he has the dimple, he has my father's dimple —" She stopped. She held all three of them in her two scarred hands against her chest, three dates, three boys, the whole stolen calendar restored at once, and she looked up at Aiko with her face wet and wild and *furious* with joy.

"I am not getting old," Bituin said. "*Ate Rosamie* — I am not getting old. I was *robbed*. Someone came into my head and took my boys' birthdays out of it like — like money out of a drawer." She was on her feet now, the band still trailing its lead, and Rosamie caught her and held her and Bituin said it into the general's shoulder, the sentence that would go around the household in a week and bring them one by one to the kitchen chair: "I was *burgled*. I am not broken. I was *burgled*, and the *doktora* gave it back."

Aiko sat very still with the grey unit warm in her hand, the unit that had her initials scratched in a stranger's confident schoolgirl hand on its underside, and she let herself count, finally, in the right direction. *One.* The first wall down. The first thing un-made that her own hand had helped to make.

Paris, she thought. Shot one.

Across the room, Letty had stopped pretending to pack a box. She crossed herself, once, and then, being Letty, put the kettle on, because in this room joy was not a feeling, it was a constitution, and a constitution requires calamansi or, failing that, tea.

There was one wall Aiko did not take down, and it was the most important work she did that month.

Maricel came on the fourth Sunday, not to be lifted but to be *guaranteed*, and she sat in the kitchen chair the way she did everything now, rationing, as if joy were a staple she'd been issued too little of and meant to make last. "Bituin says you can take things back," she said. "I don't want anything back. I want a promise." She looked at the headset, and at Aiko, and her dancer's spine was very straight. "On the nineteenth they will put the headset on me and they will try, the way they try every January, to sand down the place where my brother is, and my father's hands making the parol, and the thirteen years of Simbang Gabi, because those are the things that make me hard to keep — a woman with a December that *real* is a woman who keeps leaving the room in her head. They call it rest. *We sleep so well.*" Her jaw set. "Do not let them have it. But do not take it away to keep it *safe*, either. Don't you put it in a box on a shelf where it can't hurt me. Leave me the parts that hurt. They're *mine*. The hurt is how I know I'm still going home."

And Aiko, who had spent the month learning to open walls, built one — a single wall, the only wall in the whole job she would ever build on purpose: a firewall around Maricel's grief, untouchable, so that the refresher on the nineteenth would slide off it and report a smooth success and touch nothing, and Maricel would walk out of the white room on the twentieth with every sharp edge of her December exactly where she had left it.

"It's done," Aiko said, when it was done. "They can't reach it. And I didn't move it. It's right where you keep it."

Maricel nodded once, the way Jordan nodded, all the way down. She did not thank her; this household did not waste thanks on the obvious. She stood, smoothed her dress, and at the door she turned back.

"Rosamie says you wrote the thing they hurt us with," she said. "The original. The warm version."

"Yes," Aiko said.

"Good," said Maricel. "Then it was always coming home, too." And she went out into the grocery to pack a box for a mother in Pampanga, a parol going into it wrapped in a sweater so

the points wouldn't crush, a star folded down small enough to look like nothing.

They put Dewi on the medical charter at Al Maktoum at 6:40 on the morning of the sixteenth, and it was the first time in nine years the household had subtracted a member that the household had *chosen* to subtract, and the difference, Vanessa said afterward — just back from Dumaguete, *word for word* still in her, standing on the apron in the grey pre-heat with the rest of them — the difference was the whole book.

Linnéa had built the legend one true document at a time: a real physiotherapy conference in Lisbon, a real charter with a real flight plan, a real entry in the staffing company's own system that read like the most boring thing in the world, which was the only kind of thing Fordham's people never looked at twice. Dewi went up the airstairs in a conference lanyard and good walking shoes, carrying nothing, because she had asked to carry nothing — *no lessons in my head, no box, no name to smuggle, just the wrist* — and at the top she turned around.

She found Aiko in the small group on the tarmac and she held up her bare wrist, pale band of skin where two years had ridden, and she did not wave. She just showed it. *The gap, finally, with no beat coming to fill it.* Then she pressed two fingers to the insi

Chapter 17

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Seventeen: The Smaller Answer

The first sign that it had gone wrong was that Elliott Fordham, who had never once in six weeks let Jordan pour his own drink, let him pour his own drink.

They were on the dhow at dusk, the old Deira pearler at the tiller and the grandson coiling rope, the Springbank breathing its 1969 breath in two glasses, and Fordham was exactly as gracious as he had been every evening since Christmas — and a half-degree cooler underneath it, the way a room is cooler near a window you cannot see is open. Jordan, who read men the way Aiko read the gap between pulses, felt the draft before he found the window.

"Naomi's found a ghost," Fordham said, conversational, watching the Burj light come up across the water like a struck match held to the sky. "In the household telemetry. Ahead of renewal. She's installed new instruments this year — finer than the old ones; she's a perfectionist, which is why I keep her — and the new instruments are picking up a kind of *noise*. A drift. Nothing, she says. Calibration artifact. New box, new ghosts; they always settle." He turned the glass without drinking. "But she wants a closer look on the nineteenth. A more thorough renewal than usual. I've told her to take whatever she needs." He smiled, and it was warm, and it was a test, and Jordan understood that the price of the friendship had just gone up. "You've gone quiet, partner. You do that. It's one of the things I trust about you. Most men fill silence to sell me something. You let it sit there like furniture." A beat. "What does your silence think about ghosts?"

"My silence thinks instruments find what they're built to find," Jordan said, which was true, and therefore safe, and therefore the only kind of sentence that worked in this house. "Build a finer net, catch finer fish. Doesn't mean there were more fish. Means you can see the small ones now." He let it sit like furniture. "Probably nothing. But you don't run a longevity empire by deciding things are probably nothing. So you'll look."

"I'll look," Fordham agreed, and something in him eased, the way a dying man eases when a worthy mind confirms his vigilance instead of soothing it. He drank, finally. "You know what frightens me, Jordan? Not the void. I've made my peace with the void — the void is honest. What frightens me is *leakage*. The slow kind. A thing you built to hold still, beginning, very quietly, not to." He looked out at the harbor where ninety years ago the natural beds had died under the weight of the perfect copy. "I lost a man once to leakage. A friend. Took years. By the end he didn't know it was leaving until it had left." He did not say Goh's name. He did not say the other name, the one under thirty-six years of harbor. "So when Naomi tells me there's noise in the system, I do not hear *probably nothing*. I hear the tide, very far out, deciding which way to come in."

Jordan held the silence like furniture, and across nine thousand kilometers of nothing a woman in Dumaguete had said the same word — *leakage*, *the tide arrives the way no

wave you can point to* — and he thought: *he and Cora have the same weather in them, and neither of them has any idea.*

"To the small fish," Fordham said, raising the glass. "May they turn out to be nothing."

"To nothing," Jordan said, and drank, and felt the window open one centimeter wider at his back.

Inside the white door, the walls went up the way the tide came in: no wave you could point to.

Rosamie felt it Wednesday morning, the way she felt everything, through the rota. The Sunday rotation — the box visits, the twenty minutes at Letty's, the only twenty minutes any of them owned outright — was "under review for renewal week." The wellness checks doubled. There were new faces in the wing, Pierce's technicians in their soft shoes, carrying tablets that watched the bands breathe. The orangery was being dressed already for the nineteenth, the white furniture coming out, and somewhere under the marble a finer net had been let down into the household's sleep and was reading the gap between everyone's pulses at once.

She gathered nothing, said nothing, changed nothing in her face. She had run the house for nine years on the principle that a general who flinches teaches the enemy where the line is. But she got a word out through Letty's that same day — a line folded into a grocery order, *the doktora must know the new box sees the seam* — and that is how the family came to be in the back room of the grocery in Karama by Thursday afternoon, among the boxes and the green oilcloth and the headset Aiko had finally taught to lie.

Linnéa was high when they got there. She'd earned it: she had spent the dark hours building Dewi's exit one true document at a time and then watched the charter lift off Al Maktoum into the gold haze that morning, the first of them out clean, the diver in open water, and she had come straight to Karama still running on it, loud, restless, ribbing Letty about the calamansi, throwing an arm around Aiko, *one down, doktora, nineteen to go, look at you, you and your little headset.* She was always the loudest thing in any room and she had never once apologized for it.

Vanessa and Tatum had come to Karama straight off the Manila leg, back on the ground in Dubai only since that morning's grey hour, when they had stood on the apron beside Linnéa and watched Dewi's charter lift. The strait was still in their ears. The whole of Cora's Tuesday still rode in Vanessa, undelivered — she had promised Jordan word for word, and there had not yet been an hour quiet enough to keep the promise in. Neither of them had changed her shoes. A box that hunts does not wait for the traveler to set down her bag.

"They left a fingerprint," Aiko said, and Linnéa's arm came off her shoulder, and the room got smaller. Aiko pressed her palms flat on the oilcloth, the gesture she made before the part that couldn't be taken back. "I built the inoculation to pass the old maintenance layer — the one-point-four pulse, the firmware handshake. It does. It passes that perfectly. But Pierce's new baseline box isn't reading the *handshake*. It's reading the *texture* — the micro-

statistics of a head that's been left alone versus a head that's been worked. A head I protected reads *too smooth*. No drift. Real captivity has drift; I gave them stillness, and stillness, to the right instrument, is a fingerprint." She looked up. "It's not enough to blow us. It reads as a cluster, noise, drift. But it's enough to make her hunt. And when you hunt a cluster, you test individuals."

Linnéa got there first. Linnéa always got there first — she flipped the coin, called the room, handed everyone their job before they'd finished thinking. "Right. We pull them. Tonight. I take the white door, Tatum runs them out the service road, Aiko makes the bands lie about where everyone's sleeping — done, that's the plan, why's everybody still holding coffee—"

She ran out of sentence. That was what the room noticed, because Linnéa never ran out of sentence. The grin she wore like a tool was gone, and Linnéa with no grin was the most serious object anywhere she stood.

"You're going to tell me no," she said. "You're going to tell me we can't carry twenty through a keypad in three days. Fine. Then we carry *one*. We start with Maricel. Whatever box we've got, tonight — I'll put her over my shoulder myself—"

"Linnéa."

"—I let go of her hand once already. Five winters ago, snow on the ground, a city that goes blue at three in the afternoon. I went home and she didn't. I spent five years not knowing she was alive under that name until she looked straight through me across a tank full of fish." And the Swedish came then, low and filthy, the way it did when she was past joking, a whole sentence of it that needed no translation. "I am not doing it twice."

"If we pull her first because she's *ours*," Vanessa said, and her voice was gentle and it was iron, "then we've ranked them. We've picked the favorite Holly. That is his move, Linnéa. His whole crime." A beat, terrible, because it was true. "Her name, her call. Not yours. Even when her call is the one that breaks your heart."

Tatum had not raised her voice once. She did not raise it now; her knockouts came quiet, which was how everyone knew to brace. "Then it goes to all of them. Every woman we've touched. We get word in — through Rosamie, her house, her permission — we tell them the box is hunting, we tell them what a chair across from that machine will feel like, and we let *each one* decide what she does when she's in it. We don't pick which lie they tell. We don't pick who gets carried." Her hands were flat on the table, Maricel's gesture, the household's gesture. "And whatever any of them decides in that chair, we honor it. Even the ones we'd never have chosen for them."

The stockroom was quiet. In the grocery, Letty was selling a phone card and asking after a stranger's mother in Ilocos by name.

"Get it to Rosamie," Vanessa said. "The weather. All of it." She looked at Linnéa, who had sat down on a crate of San Miguel and not picked the grin back up. "Her house. Her call."

They tested Imee on Friday.

It was not called a test. It was called a *calibration consult*, and it happened in a soft white room off the medical wing, with Dr. Pierce herself present — which was itself the tell, because Pierce did not attend routine calibrations, and Imee, who had survived a Pasay husband and a debt that came collecting with a knife and the long arithmetic of becoming thirty-nine kilograms and then becoming a woman again, knew the smell of a room that was pretending. The new box sat between them, quiet, reading her wrist and her breath and the small electricals of a face.

"Just talk to me," Pierce said, kind, lonely, terribly good at her work. "Tell me how you've been sleeping. Whether anything's felt different lately. New guests in the house — sometimes new energy unsettles the routine. Have you noticed anything unusual? Anyone asking unusual questions? You can tell me. I only want everyone *rested* for the nineteenth."

And Imee, who had known about the family since the radio handshake and had told no one — Imee, who loved Rosamie, who called Holly the raft, who had made the truest case anyone in that house could make against them, that the only thing that had ever held still in her broken life was the thing these strangers had come to take — Imee felt the question land on the exact fault line that ran down the center of her. Because part of her wanted to lie, and part of her wanted, with a longing that frightened her, to keep the raft, and the box did not care which part won; the box only read the *spike*, the half-second where Imelda Reyes hesitated between two betrayals and her pulse and her skin and the small electricals of her face all leaned, together, toward the truth.

Pierce saw it. Pierce was lonely, not blind. She leaned in, gentle as a hand on a door. "Imee," she said. "Who's been asking?"

And the door of the consult room opened without a knock, and Maricel walked in.

She had no business there. She had talked her way past a technician with the only currency the house ran on, which was the appearance of compliance, and she came in with her dancer's spine very straight and her face doing the thing it did, the rationing, and she looked at the box and at Pierce and at Imee on the fault line, and she chose, in the half-second the box was still reading Imee's spike, to give the machine a louder, simpler, more *believable* signal to read instead.

"It's me," Maricel said. "Whatever your ghost is, doktora. It's me. You're wasting your morning on Imelda; she sleeps like a child; she does the breathing wrong but she does it." A small contempt, perfectly judged. "I'm the one who can't keep January in my head. I'm the one who tells the others the renewal is theft and the rest is theater. I've been teaching them to *grumble* — not your machines, I don't know your machines, I know *mood* — I've been poisoning the well since October, because I am tired, doktora. I am so tired of being kept. And a tired woman talks, and talk is contagious, and that is your *drift*. That's your cluster. It isn't a leak. It's a *complaint*. And the complaint has a name, and the name is mine."

It was the smaller answer. It was the answer a system always preferred — not an outside hand on the door, not a breach with technique and an architecture and a woman in a Karama stockroom running a seam backward, but a *malcontent*: a single sad difficult unit poisoning morale, the kind of problem you solve by removing the unit. Pierce's instruments swung toward the loud true signal of a woman confessing a real defiance and away from the small leaning fault line of a woman who had merely hesitated, and Imee — Imee understood, a full second behind the room, what had just been spent on her, and made a sound, and Maricel did not look at her, because to look at her would be to undo it.

"You'll want to separate me," Maricel told Pierce, helpfully, the way you tell a host where the bathroom is. "Before the nineteenth. So the mood doesn't spread. That's what you do with a tired woman who talks." Her chin was level. "I'd start now."

Rosamie tried to stop it, and could not, because the only way to stop it was to tell Pierce the larger answer.

She came to Maricel in the corridor afterward, in the eight meters of nothing between the consult room and the wing, and the household's general, who had not flinched in nine years, was as close to flinching as Imee had ever seen her. "You will tell them you were lying," Rosamie said, low, in Tagalog, fast. "A tantrum. A bad week. You didn't mean it. I will fix it. I have fixed worse. *Maricel.*"

"You can't fix it without giving them the true thing," Maricel said, in English, slowly, so the technician at the end of the corridor could half-hear and report a difficult woman being difficult. "And the true thing has Imelda in it. And the doktora. And the strangers. And your notebook, *Ate*." She switched to Tagalog, fast and quiet, just for the eight meters. "I rationed my joy for three years so that when the day came I would have enough left to spend all at once. This is the day. Let me spend it. Don't you *dare* take it from me to keep me safe." The household's accusation, turned on the household's general. "That's his move, Ate. That's his whole crime. A woman who decides to spend herself, and someone who loves her deciding she may not. Their names, their call. You taught me that before they ever came." Her voice did not break; she had budgeted for this. "My call. I'm covering Imee. Honor it."

And Rosamie, who had waited nine years for someone to try the door and had finally, this winter, found people who tried it the right way — by *asking* — stood in the eight meters and honored it, which was the hardest thing she had done inside that house, because honoring it meant doing nothing while a woman she loved walked into the silence on purpose.

When Tatum heard, hours later, it was through Father Anil — who came to the war room grey-faced, having gone to the residence for the Friday rotation Mass and been told, with great courtesy, that one of his communicants was *resting in private care ahead of renewal* and would not attend, and that no, he could not see her, and that her name, when he asked for it so that he might at least pray for her by it, was *Holly, Father. Like the others.* Tatum put her head down on the war-room table for a long moment. Then she stood and said, in a voice scraped flat, "Her call," and wrote it on the board beside a name the house had just spent three days learning to say. "Her call. God help us. She's right, and I hate that she's right."

They held Maricel apart for the days before the nineteenth.

It was done gently, because everything in that house was done gently; gentleness was the climate the cruelty grew in. She was moved to a quiet suite in the medical wing — *rest*, *calibration*, *care* — and the door had a keypad she did not know, and a charging rack with one pin, and a window onto the orangery where eleven gardeners tuned thirty thousand pearls of light into the glass for the renewal gala, and she was not permitted the Sunday rotation, which meant she was not permitted Letty's, which meant the box she had half-packed for her mother in Pampanga — a parol wrapped in a sweater so the points wouldn't crush, a star folded small enough to look like nothing — sat unsent on a shelf in Karama with her mother's address in her own hand on the customs slip, and no one allowed to finish it or send it.

And she was not permitted Rosamie. That was the price under the price. The two of them had run the inside of that house together for three years, the general and her best mover, and now Maricel sat in a room where the only name anyone said to her was *Holly* — said kindly, by nurses who tucked her in and promised she'd sleep so well after the nineteenth — and the thing Elliott Fordham had spent three fortunes building, the confiscation of a name, closed over her completely and voluntarily, because she had reached up and pulled it down over her own head to keep it off Imelda Reyes, who had never once asked her to.

Linnéa took it worst, and that was the thing that frightened the room — not that she said the most, the way she said the most about everything, but that she said the least. The loudest of them went quiet, and the quiet was how they all understood how bad it was. She paced the war room first, the way she couldn't not — she threw out a plan, *we take the medical wing*, and Vanessa said the wing was watched; she threw out another, *Father Anil walks me in as clergy*, and Tatum said Anil had already been turned at the door; she threw out a third and heard it die in her own mouth before anyone had to kill it. And then she ran out. Linnéa, who never ran out, stood at the war-room glass with the city throwing its light up against the haze, and she had no plan, and the silence coming off her was the worst sound in the room.

"I taught her that lift," she said finally, to the glass, to nobody. "At Berns. The whole company wanted it and she was the only one with the nerve. You have to trust the catcher completely — you let go in the air, fully, no hedging, and you trust the hands are going to be where they said." She didn't turn around. "She just let go in the air to catch Imee. Fully. No hedging." Her breath fogged the glass and cleared. "And the hands aren't there. We're the hands. And we're standing in a room."

"We're the hands on the *nineteenth*," Vanessa said, and crossed the room and stood beside her, not touching — the held centimeter, the thing Fordham envied. "Not before. She bought us the nineteenth, Linnéa. She handed Pierce a tired woman to fire so the box would stop hunting the rest, and it *worked* — the wing's calmer tonight than it's been all week. They think they cut out the rot. They think they're safe." She watched the gardeners tune the false light. "That's the only reason any of the others have a chance in that orangery in three days. She didn't let go into nothing. She let go into the nineteenth. And we are going to *be there*."

Outside the white door, in a one-pin room, a woman who had kept thirteen consecutive years of Simbang Gabi — nine dawn Masses for one wish, thirteen times over — sat in the dark she had chosen and counted, because counting helps, because the gap is yours even when the beat is theirs. She counted the gardeners' lights coming on across the orangery, thirty thousand false pearls warming one by one for a festival of keeping. She reached a number she liked and stopped, and she put her hand flat against her own sternum, over the place Aiko had walled off and sworn no one could reach — the parts that hurt, the parts that were hers: her father's hands folding a parol, her mother's table, the long dawn cold of the thirteen years — and she found them all exactly where she had left them, every sharp edge intact, and she held them against her chest in the dark like a woman holding three children's birthdays, and she did not cry, because she had budgeted for this, and a tired woman who has spent herself on purpose does not weep at getting precisely what she paid for.

She had two days. The festival of keeping was on the nineteenth.

Chapter 18

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Eighteen: The Festival of Keeping

The renewal had been a gala for nine years, because Elliott Fordham did not believe in doing necessary things shamefully.

That was the genius of it, Vanessa thought, standing at the production desk at six in the evening on the nineteenth of January with a headset on and the orangery filling around her with the most beautiful lie in the Gulf — the genius and the horror were the same object, as they always were with him. A lesser keeper would have run his refreshers in a basement and called them maintenance. Fordham threw a *party*. Two hundred guests, the same flown-in roses, the white furniture, a string quartet under the citrus trees, and the household circulating among the guests in oyster silk, radiant, rested, being admired — while one by one, in rotation, each woman was drawn quietly out of the bright room, walked down a corridor to the medical wing, sat in a chair for forty minutes, and walked back out to the party smiling, and no guest ever saw the seam, because the party *was* the seam. The renewal hid inside its own celebration. You could not point to the moment a woman left to be rewritten any more than you could point to the wave that brought the tide.

"They've started the rotation," Aiko said in her ear, on channel one, from her station near the medical corridor where she was, to all appearances, a guest admiring the orchids. "Two through so far. Joy. Ana Marie. Both back on the floor. Both smiling." A pause Vanessa had learned to read. "Both of mine. The inoculation's holding — Pierce's box logged two clean refreshes. The lie passed."

"Texture?"

"That's the thing I can't see from here," Aiko said, and the flatness in it was the most frightened Vanessa had ever heard her. "The handshake passed. Whether the new box flagged the *smoothness* — I won't know until I know. We built a lie good enough to fool the lock. We're about to find out if it's good enough to fool the locksmith."

Across the orangery, under the great glass ribs strung with thirty thousand points of false pearl, Elliott Fordham was holding court in black tie, and dying, and magnificent, and Jordan Harlan stood at his shoulder being his friend.

"You're not drinking," Fordham observed. "On my favorite night."

"I'm working out which of these people I'd trust to pour me a glass of water if I were the one being wheeled down a corridor," Jordan said, and Fordham laughed, delighted, because Jordan had learned that the way to survive this man's attention on a night like this was to keep handing him exactly enough truth to taste.

"None of them," Fordham said. "That's the answer. Look at them." He surveyed his two hundred guests with the fond contempt of a man who had bought every one of them at least once. "Every soul in this room is performing the most expensive thing they own. The minister is performing piety. The shipping family is performing old money over new debt. That woman is performing forty. And they all believe the performance is the self — that is the great comfortable error of the rich, Jordan; they mistake the costume for the body, because they have never once been cold." He took a slow turn of his glass. "My household is the only honest thing at this party. The girls perform nothing tonight. They've been *relieved* of performance. Do you know how rare that is? To be somewhere you don't have to hold your own face up with your own hands?"

"Is that what the renewal does," Jordan said, evenly. "Relieves them of holding their own faces."

The pale eyes came round to him, and for a moment the draft Jordan had felt on the dhow moved through the warm room. "You disapprove."

"I'm a guest," Jordan said. "Guests don't disapprove. They observe." He let it sit like furniture, and then gave Fordham the real thing, because the real thing was the only currency that held here and because, God help him, a part of it was true. "I think you love them, Elliott. In the only grammar you have left. I think that's the part nobody who writes about you will ever understand — that the cage is *tended*. I've seen men keep women out of appetite. That's not this. This is a man who has decided that the cruelest thing in the universe is loss, and has set out to build one place on earth where nothing is ever lost." He held the pale eyes. "I think it's the most loving terrible thing I've ever stood next to. And I think you can't tell the difference anymore between keeping something safe and keeping it."

Fordham was quiet for a long moment. Out under the citrus trees the quartet turned a phrase of Schubert.

"No," he said softly, at last. "I expect I can't. The man who could tell me the difference left in 2012." He drank. "She had a rule about it, in fact. I've told you I broke a rule once, for excellent reasons. That was the rule. *Never improve me.*" He smiled, and it did not reach the pale eyes, and Jordan stood very still inside the largest opening the man had ever given him, the door to the harbor swinging wide on a party night — *and did not walk through it*, because the nineteenth was the gate and not the wreck, because to reach for Cora now, with the household mid-rotation and Pierce's box hunting, was to let go in the air with no hands beneath. He filed the harbor where he filed everything, against a night still coming.

"To excellent reasons," Jordan said, and did not drink, and Fordham noticed, and loved him for it.

They came for Maricel at nine.

She had counted the hours from the one-pin room — the festival's noise reaching her through the wall, the quartet, the laughter, the particular silence of a house keeping its appointments — and when the two nurses came with their soft shoes and their kind faces and their

wheelchair she did not need, she stood on her own, dancer's spine, and walked between them down the corridor to the white room, because she had decided weeks ago that whatever else they took, they would not have the walk.

Pierce was waiting. The box was waiting. And the headset, when they settled it over the long black hair, was the thing Maricel had been told about in three years of Januaries and had never once been allowed to remember clearly afterward — *we sleep so well* — and she understood, with the new clarity that was itself the doktora's gift, that the not-remembering was the point, that she had walked into this room thirty-six times across three years and been handed back a smooth blank each time and told it was rest.

"Just relax, Holly," Pierce said, gently, watching the box. "This won't take long. You've had a hard week. We're going to help you let some of it go."

Some of it. Maricel closed her eyes. Behind them, in the place Aiko had walled — *it's right where you keep it; they can't reach it; I didn't move it* — her father sat at a low table with bamboo and shell and a knife too big for the work, building a parol taller than his daughter, every year a new one, because he could not help himself. Her mother's table at midnight. The long blue cold of nine dawn Masses, thirteen years of them, one wish each year, thirteen wishes spent and one still owed. She put her attention against the wall the way you put your hand against a door to feel whether there is fire on the other side, and she could not tell — that was the terror Aiko had refused to spare her, the terror that was the price of the protection being *real* — she could not tell from the inside whether the wall would hold, because a true wall feels the same as no wall until something pushes.

The headset warmed. The pulse found her wrist. And Naomi Pierce, lonely and brilliant and very good at her work, leaned toward the box to read the texture of a woman she had been told was the rot — and the machine reached for Maricel Bautista's December, for her father's hands and her mother's table and the thirteen unanswered dawns —

— and slid off it.

Smoothly. Completely. The refresher ran its forty minutes and reported, to a console that logged it and a baseline scan that believed it, a flawless and successful session: subject relaxed, subject rested, troublesome affect smoothed, morale restored. The box read a tired malcontent made calm. It did not read the wall, because Aiko had built the wall out of the machine's own grammar, a sealed corner that reported itself as open. The grief sat behind it, untouched, every sharp edge exactly where its owner kept it — and on the outside, where Pierce was watching, there was nothing to see but a difficult woman becoming, gratifyingly, less difficult.

"There," Pierce said, almost tender, lifting the headset. "Better?"

And Maricel Bautista, who did not yet know — who would not know for hours, not until she was alone again and dared to reach for her father's hands and found them still there, the parol still tall, the cold still cold — opened her eyes and gave Naomi Pierce the smile the handbook required, the costume's smile, the one that cost her nothing now because the thing it was protecting was safe behind a wall a stranger from Paris had built her out of love and stolen science.

"Yes, doktora," she said. "Better."

They walked her back toward the party. And somewhere in the bright noise of the festival of keeping, a woman who had spent herself on purpose three days ago to buy this exact survival passed within eight meters of the family who had promised to be her hands — passed Aiko at the orchids, who clocked the smooth refresh log on her own tablet and let out, very slowly, a breath she had been holding since the sixteenth — and none of them gave any sign, because giving a sign was the one thing that could still undo it, and they had all learned the household's oldest skill at last: to carry the largest possible joy across a crowded room with a perfectly empty face.

It nearly held perfectly. Nearly.

At eleven, Pierce found Vanessa at the production desk — not as a suspect; as a colleague, which was worse, because Pierce's loneliness reached for competence the way Fordham's reached for friendship. "Your room is extraordinary," she said, looking up at the false pearls. "I keep meaning to tell you. The smartest woman at every party I attend is the one nobody's looking at, and tonight it's you." A beat, and the grey eyes came down, and the scientist surfaced under the compliment. "Strangest thing. My instruments have been quiet all night — beautifully quiet, the cluster resolved, we found the source and removed her from rotation." Maricel. "And yet." She tilted her head. "Two or three of the readings tonight came back *cleaner* than my models predict. Not noisy. The opposite. Almost as if someone had been — cared for. Rested. In a way the protocol doesn't produce." She smiled, faintly, at her own puzzle. "I'll chase it after the holiday. New box. New ghosts. They always settle." She touched Vanessa's arm, colleague to colleague. "Get some sleep. You've earned the room."

And she moved off into the party, and Vanessa stood very still with the cold running down her back, because she had just heard the locksmith notice the lie — not catch it; *notice* it — and file it for after the holiday, which meant the inoculation had a shelf life now, a fuse lit and slow, and every protected woman in that orangery was living on borrowed smoothness.

"Aiko," she said, low, on channel one. "She sees it. Not us — the texture. She's parked it till after the nineteenth. We have a window and it's closing."

"I heard," Aiko said. "I built a lie that survives a glance and not a study. She's going to study it." A pause. "Then the wreck can't wait for a perfect night. It has to happen inside the window she just gave us."

"I know," Vanessa said, watching Elliott Fordham raise a glass under the glass to two hundred people performing the most expensive things they owned. "I know."

She got the proof at two in the morning, after the last guest had gone and the orangery stood dark and ticking and the household had been returned to the residence, smooth and rested and smiling, the festival of keeping concluded for another year.

It came on channel one, in a voice Vanessa had not heard use her own channel before — Rosamie, who never broke protocol, breaking it now in the dead hour because some things a general delivers herself.

"Madam." The load-bearing stillness, with something underneath it that had not been there in nine years. "She is back in her room. The one-pin room; they have not yet returned her to the wing proper. I was permitted to sit with her. *Permitted.*" The contempt was brief and total. "She asked me a question, madam, when the nurses left. She asked me to tell her something only she would know — her father's parol, the year he made it taller than the door and it would not come down the stairs and they had to pass it through the window. To see if she still had it." A silence on the line, and in it the whole nine years. "She has it. Every bit. She told me the story to the end, the window, the laughing, the way her father bowed to it like a partner. They put the machine on her for forty minutes and they reached for it and they could not find it." Rosamie's voice did the thing it had never once done on an open channel. It shook. "What did your doctor *do*, madam. What did she build inside my Maricel."

"A wall," Vanessa said softly, into the dark of her own dismantled orangery. "Around the parts that hurt. Because Maricel asked her to leave them. Because they're hers."

The line was quiet for a long moment.

"Nine years," Rosamie said at last, "I have kept this house by deciding what to protect, alone, with nothing but a notebook and a Friday bath. And tonight a stranger reached into the worst room in this country and protected the one thing I could not." A breath. "I have been running an interview since the orangery, madam. You have passed it." The stillness came back into her voice, settled, decided, a general committing her reserves. "On the nineteenth I held the inside for you because it was right. Tell me when. I will hold it for you again, and next time I will not only hold it." A pause. "Next time I will open the door."

She was gone before Vanessa could answer.

And Vanessa Smart stood alone in the dark glass cathedral she had built to honor the original, the false pearls cold overhead, the real one's recording still undelivered in a phone nine thousand kilometers' worth of feeling away, the locksmith's slow fuse lit, the household survived and smooth and smiling and *kept* for one more year — and the general of the other country had just told her the door would open from the inside.

The gate was passed. Everyone had come through. Maricel had walked into the worst room in the Gulf carrying her whole December and walked out still carrying it, which was the smallest victory in the history of the family and one of the largest, because it meant the thing they had been promising for sixteen chapters was *true*: that a person's name and a person's grief could be defended, that the wall could be built the other way, that what Paris had done could be undone and what Fordham did could be refused.

It also meant the wreck had a clock on it now, ticking from a lonely woman's puzzled smile.

"Soon," Vanessa said, to the dark, to the pearls, to the recording she still had to deliver and the man she still had to wreck and the family scattered across the sleeping city holding their empty faces. "Soon."

Chapter 19

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Nineteen: What Dumaguete Sent

The package came by ordinary courier on the twenty-first, addressed to the foundation in care of a Karama grocery, and Letty signed for it the way she signed for everything — with her whole name and a blessing on the driver's mother — and did not open it, because some boxes you do not open until the people they are meant for are in the room.

It was the size of a hymnal, which is what it nearly was.

They gathered in the back room that evening, all five, the first time the family had been in one place since before Dumaguete — Jordan in from the Garden, the Springbank still on him like weather; Aiko from her vigil over Pierce's slow fuse; Linnéa, quieter than the room had ever known her, three days into a silence that had not lifted since they took Maricel apart. Vanessa set Tatum's phone on the green oilcloth beside the unopened parcel, and for a moment nobody touched either, because they both held a voice, and the family had learned this winter to be careful with voices.

"I owe Jordan something first," Vanessa said. "I promised it on the apron and there hasn't been an hour quiet enough to keep it in. There is now." She looked at him across the boxes — *FRAGILE, FOR MAMA, DO NOT OPEN UNTIL CHRISTMAS* — and she gave him the Tuesday, word for word, the way she'd carried it nine thousand kilometers: the eleven nights, the side table, the one whiskey making itself last two sets. The question he asked the bandleader instead of asking for her — *what does she sing when the hotel isn't choosing.* The dark Tuesday, the chairs on the tables, the one Englishman with his hands flat on his knees like a schoolboy. *Bituing Marikit*, sung in her own dress because that was her condition, and the tears falling off his chin onto the beautiful suit, unhidden, which in an Englishman of that vintage was a more violent declaration than the proposal. The rule that was hers and not his — *never improve me; the day you try is the day I am gone.* And the dossier, bound like a prospectus. *Project Harbourlight. Restoration estimate: C., age 28.* And the last words on the telephone, his and hers: *I was only trying to save you. From what. From becoming someone the Tuesday wouldn't recognize.*

Jordan was quiet for a long time when she finished. He had spent six weeks across a lamp from the man, building a friendship that was no longer entirely a job, and Vanessa watched him set the whole of Elliott Fordham down beside the whole of Corazon Villanueva and see, finally, the shape they made together.

"He told me the same weather," Jordan said at last. "On the dhow. *Leakage. The tide arrives the way no wave you can point to.* I thought he was describing the disease." He turned his glass and didn't drink. "He was describing the marriage. He's been living inside the night she sang to him for thirty-six years, and the one thing that night was *about* — that he wanted to hear what she'd become — is the exact thing he then spent three fortunes making sure no woman in his house would ever be allowed to do. He froze the question and murdered the

answer." He looked up. "She's not the cruelty in this story. I needed to know that before tonight. She's the only one who ever told him the truth, and he built a palace to keep from hearing it."

"Then let's hear what she sent him," Vanessa said, and opened the box.

The songbook was on top. Old — older than the household, older than the marriage, a soft-covered Filipino hymnal and art-song collection mended along its spine with surgical tape laid over older surgical tape, the pages gone the color of weak tea, the kundiman titles in a typeface from before any of them were born. *Bituing Marikit.* *Mutya ng Pasig.* *Nasaan Ka Irog.* The real songs. The setlist the hotel had never let her sing, that the Englishman had paid one dark Tuesday to hear, that she had carried home through eighteen years and a divorce and never stopped teaching to children in a small city by the sea.

Inside the front cover, in a choir directress's firm hand, four words and an initial.

For my daughters, who were never copies. — C.

Tatum made a small sound. Linnéa, who had not spoken in three days, reached out and touched the word *daughters* with one finger, the way you touch a name on a stone, and did not say anything, but the silence changed temperature.

Nobody glossed it. Nobody in that room said the thing a cleverer reader might catch — that a woman named Heart had just claimed twenty-one daughters bred to wear her face, and given them the one inheritance that had ever truly been hers to pass down, which was not the face at all. He had collected her likeness and discarded her songs. She was sending the songs home. The Muses do not inherit their mother's features; they inherit her art, and carry her forward by making rather than resembling. Fordham had gotten the myth exactly backward for nine years, and the correction had just arrived in a taped-up hymnal addressed to a grocery.

"There's a note for us," Aiko said, lifting a folded sheet from between the pages. She read it aloud, flat, which was how she read things that moved her. "*To the wreckers. The recording is for Elliott — you will know the hour; I trust your ears more than I trust my mercy. The book is for the girls. Tell them the understudy of their understudies sends her love, and that they were never the copy of anything; the man simply never learned to hear past a face. One more thing, since you are thorough people and will want it: I was married to him for sixteen years and I signed everything he put in front of me, including the things that built his money and the things that hide it. I know how the man is wired, hija. Legally and otherwise. When you reach the part of this where you need to know where a thing like that keeps its off-switch — call me. I will not come to Dubai. But I will pick up the telephone.*"

The slow fuse Pierce had lit at the gala ticked under the whole room. *I'll chase it after the holiday.* The inoculated women were living on borrowed smoothness; the window the locksmith had unknowingly granted them was closing day by day, and now Dumaguete had sent both halves of what could close it from their side — the voice that could open the man, and the offer of the off-switch that could open the cage that would otherwise outlive him.

"She just handed us the wreck," Jordan said quietly. "The recording cracks Elliott. And the off-switch—" he didn't finish, because the trust, the perpetuity instrument, the thing that

meant even the man's death freed no one, had just acquired a key with a Dumaguete area code, and that was a Chapter for a night still coming.

"Then we set it," Vanessa said. She stood, and looked at the two voices on the green oilcloth — the recording that would unmake a man, the songbook that would remake twenty-one women — and at the family around them, scattered and reassembled, Linnéa's three-day silence and Aiko's redeemed hands and Tatum's wet eyes and Jordan carrying a dead marriage's whole weather in his chest. "Pierce gave us a window and she's going to close it the day she gets bored of her own puzzle. Rosamie says the door opens from the inside now. Cora's given us the thing that opens the man and the number that opens the cage." She picked up the phone with the Tuesday in it, and held it like something live. "We don't get the perfect night. We get *this* week. So here's the shape of it, and then everybody sleeps, because the next part doesn't have a place to sleep in the middle of it."

Outside, in the grocery, Letty was closing up — the shutter coming down by inches, the Santo Niño watching the till, a wall of half-packed hugs waiting eight weeks for the sea. On a high shelf among them sat one box that had stopped being added to: a parol wrapped in a sweater so the points wouldn't crush, a mother's Pampanga address in a dancer's hand on the customs slip, unsent.

"Soon," Vanessa said again, to the room this time, to all of them. "We aim it this week."

And the family bent their heads together over the green oilcloth, the recording and the songbook between them like two lamps, and began, quietly, in the back room of an embassy that smelled of cardboard and dried mango and twenty-six years of other people's names, to plan the wreck of Elliott Fordham.

Chapter 20

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Twenty: The Wreck

He chose the dhow, when Jordan asked for an evening alone — the two of them, the old pearler and his grandson sent ashore this once, the Springbank down to nine bottles and then, after tonight, fewer. Jordan had said only that he had something Elliott needed to hear before the friendship could go any further, and Fordham, who collected serious things, had said *of course, the boat, where else,* and so they were anchored off the Creek mouth at dusk with the third version of the city coming up in gold across the black water, exactly where the man had first told Jordan he was dying.

"You've been somewhere," Fordham observed, pouring — both glasses, tonight; the brief democracy of the gala had closed again. "You and your partner both. The foundation flew to the Philippines. School music programs." He smiled. "I had it checked, naturally. It was exactly what it said it was, which with the two of you it always maddeningly is. But you came back carrying something. I've watched you carry it for a week. Set it down, Jordan. You're among friends. You're among *friend*, singular, which I've discovered is rarer and worth more."

"I am," Jordan said. "That's why it's me bringing it and not a lawyer." He took out the phone. He set it on the small table between them, beside the lamp, where for six weeks the man had set out whiskey like instruments. "I'm going to play you a recording. I want you to know three things before I do. It came to us freely — we went looking, but what's on it was given, not taken. Nobody on it is dead. And I'm your friend when it starts and I'll be your friend when it ends, which is the only reason I'd do something this cruel to a dying man." He held the pale eyes. "Her name is on the songbook she sent your household, Elliott. Not Holly. The other one. The one you kept the billing off of for thirty-six years."

The stillness came over Fordham then — the deep stillness, the one his face had been trained out of and his hands never had, the hands going flat and motionless on the white cloth — and Jordan saw the man understand, before a note had played, that the tide he'd felt at the far edge of the water for thirty-six years had finally decided which way to come in.

"Play it," Fordham said. His voice did not change. That was the most frightening thing on the boat.

Jordan played it.

And into the dusk over the anchorage, off a telephone balanced on a pearling dhow, the Original sang *Bituing Marikit* — at sixty-two, the river thirty-six years deeper in its valley, the alto carrying everything the soprano on the Tuesday could not yet have known to carry — and Elliott Fordham sat with his hands flat on the white cloth and his beautiful suit and did not move, did not reach to stop it, did not hide his face, while the beautiful star came down, and down, and down, and the years he had spent three fortunes trying to freeze played back to

him with all of themselves intact, *more* than the Tuesday, the Tuesday with a whole life grown around it like nacre around a wound.

The recording ended. The water moved against the hull. Across the black strait the Burj put up its hourly fire, indifferent.

"She wouldn't come," Fordham said at last. It was not a question. "You asked her. She said no."

"She said you don't deserve the room," Jordan said. "Her word. The room. She said you taught her that yourself, on a Tuesday, with the chairs on the tables."

And Elliott Fordham — fortress-handsome, beloved of a city, the man who had decided death was a logistics problem — put one of his still hands over his mouth, the way he had not done at any deathbed or diagnosis, and wept the way Cora had said he wept, in private, helplessly, the best thing in him, for a long time, while his friend sat with him in the dark and did not look away, because looking away would have been a mercy and this was not the night for mercy of that kind.

When it was over he was quieter than Jordan had ever seen him, and older, and strangely — Jordan would say this to Vanessa, trying to name it — *lighter*, the way a man is lighter when a thing he has carried alone for thirty-six years is finally also being carried by someone else, even an enemy, even a friend.

"She knew," Fordham said. "She always knew. That the Tuesday wasn't the song." He looked at his hands. "I have spent thirty years insisting it was the song. Because the song I could keep. The song I could *cast*."

"You couldn't keep her," Jordan said, gently, the wreck now fully open and running. "So you kept the casting call. Twenty-two women, Elliott. You held the audition for thirty-six years and never once let anyone get the part, because getting the part would mean becoming someone — aging, arguing, leaving, *being* — and you'd already learned what becoming-someone costs you. You learned it from her. So you built a house where Holly never has to become anyone. Where she's always twenty-eight and always at the side table and the answer to *what will she become* is never, ever spoken." He let it sit, the furniture of it. "It's the most loving terrible thing I've ever stood next to. And it's a tomb. You've been keeping twenty-two women in the one room in your country where the Tuesday can never happen again — where nobody is allowed to sing the song the hotel didn't choose."

Vanessa came aboard at full dark, brought out by the grandson in the tender, because some parts of a wreck are the husband's and some are the wife's, and the part that was coming now was hers.

She did not sit. She stood at the rail with the city behind her and let Fordham look at her — the designer, the witch, the woman who had hung his ballroom with thirty thousand pearls in honor of the original and watched him greenlight his own indictment as decor — and she watched him understand, at last, what the pearl party had been.

"You knew," he said. "At the gala. The whole theme. The originals."

"I laid it on your rose path and you couldn't see it," Vanessa said. "That's not stupidity, Elliott. You're the least stupid man I've ever stood across from. It's that you'd spent thirty years training yourself not to see exactly that one thing, because seeing it would cost you the house." She came off the rail then, and crossed to the lamp, and set down beside the phone the second object Dumaguete had sent — not for him: the songbook, the tape-mended hymnal, open to the inscription. She did not read it to him. She let him read it himself, in the lamplight, four words and an initial in a choir directress's firm hand.

For my daughters, who were never copies. — C.

He looked at it for a long time.

"There it is," he said softly. "The word I never let myself use." He touched *daughters* the way Linnéa had, the way you touch a name on a stone. "I told myself I was preserving her. A man preserves a wife. A man does not — " he stopped. "A father lets them become. That's the entire job of the thing. You make them and then you spend the rest of your life watching them walk away from you into people you don't recognize, and you call it *pride* instead of *loss*, and that is the bravest ordinary thing human beings do, and I could not do it. Not with her. Not with any of the twenty-two I made in her image." His hands were flat again. "I kept the face and threw away the song. She's just told me, in four words, that the song was the child. I collected the wrong inheritance for thirty-six years."

"Yes," Vanessa said. "You did."

And here it came — the thing Jordan had warned the family about weeks ago, the thing they had all known would arrive, because a man like Fordham does not go down without throwing his best punch, and his best punch would be true. He lifted his eyes from the songbook, and the old steel came back into them, the fortress, the certainty, the man who had built three empires and a paradise out of refusing the schedule, and he looked at the two people who had spent six weeks dismantling the only thing he had ever built to keep love safe, and he said it.

"You know," Elliott Fordham said, quietly, "it's so, so much easier to destroy than to create."

It landed, and it sat there, exactly as heavy as it was true.

Nobody answered it fast. It was only the three of them, the lamp, the songbook, the recording, the water. Jordan said nothing — Jordan, who liked this man, who had built a friendship that was no longer entirely a job, let the silence honor the punch, because it deserved honoring; they *had* crossed the world taking things apart; the man bleeding in front of them had a right to name what had been done to him.

Vanessa let it sit the full length it needed. Then she gave him the one sentence, and only the one, because more than one would have been an argument, and this was not an argument; it was a correction, delivered the way you deliver a true thing to a dying man you have just unhoused.

"You're right," she said. "And you'd know — you destroyed twenty-two women to build one, and called it creating."

The dhow swung slowly on its anchor.

She did not say the rest. She did not say *creation is the thing that grows away from you* — children, students, a dance company, a daughter who turns sixty-two and teaches other people's children to sing, a song handed down through a taped-up book to twenty-one women who will carry it into lives he will never see. She did not say that the household he was about to free would be the proof, or that somewhere a mother's table in Pampanga would set out a parol taller than a person next Christmas and *that* was creation and his marble paradise was not. She did not say it because the structural answer was not a speech; it was a year away, in a small house by a strait and a smaller one in Pampanga, and the man would either live to glimpse it or he would not. The line had drawn blood — she felt it draw blood; *what have we built*, the oldest question, would ride home with her and Jordan tonight and they would have to answer it to each other in the dark — but you do not hand your enemy your own wound to stanch his. You let his land, you correct it once, and you move to the thing that ends it.

"Here's where it ends, Elliott," she said. "Not in ruin. You were never our enemy — your *blindness* was. So: the recording stays with you; she meant it as a gift and a verdict both, and it's yours. The songbook goes to the household tonight, because it's theirs. And tomorrow your lawyers draw up the dissolution of the trust — the perpetuity instrument, the thing that keeps the Garden a cage after you're gone. You sign it yourself. Whitcombe administers the wind-down: every woman's contract paid out in full, every passport returned, every remittance guaranteed by our foundation until she's on her own feet, every dream in Rosamie's notebook funded — restitution, not charity, paid from a fee we'll never charge. The house stays warm for exactly as long as each woman needs it warm, and then she goes, in her own name, with the song her mother sent her." She held the pale eyes. "You're going to do this. Not because we'll make you — though Cora knows where the off-switches are, and she'll pick up the phone, and you know she will. You're going to do it because you've just heard what the Tuesday became, and you finally understand that keeping her was the one way to guarantee you'd never hear it again."

Fordham was quiet for a long while. When he spoke, the steel had gone out of him, and what was left was the thing underneath it, which Jordan had glimpsed once on this same deck and never since.

"You do this for a living," he said. It was not quite a question. "The two of you. I've felt it for weeks — the shape under the friendship — and I told myself I was imagining it, because the alternative was that the most interesting people of my last good season had come for me." A faint, ruined smile. "There's always a disposition, isn't there. A man like me learns to ask for his terms early." He looked at the songbook, then at her. "So. What's mine?"

"You get the cruelest thing I have," Vanessa said, and her voice was not cruel at all; it was almost tender, which was worse. "You get released. Into the two years you have left, Elliott, with no Hollys in the house. No casting call. No twenty-eight-year-old answer standing between you and the question. You're going to sit in the empty room — the one you've spent

thirty years and three fortunes furnishing so you'd never have to sit in it — and you're going to lose your memory the way every human being who ever lived has lost everything, without an ark, without a copy, *mortally*." She picked up the songbook and held it a moment, then set it back down by his still hand. "And here's the mercy buried in it, the only one I can offer, and it's real: she sang you the Tuesday. At sixty-two. With the whole life in it. You spent thirty years trying to freeze a three-minute memory, and tonight the woman herself handed you the proof that the thing you loved didn't freeze — it *deepened*. It became. The river got darker and carried more. You don't have to build the ark, Elliott. The thing you were trying to save was never in danger of being lost. It was only ever in danger of being *kept*."

The lamp burned between them. Across the water the city performed its endless argument that anything could be built if the money held.

"Play it again," Elliott Fordham said. "Before you take the rest of it from me. Play it once more."

And Jordan picked up the phone, and played it again, and the three of them sat on the dhow in the dark — the wife who would not come, singing; the husband she would not come to, weeping without hiding it; the two wreckers who had crossed the world to bring a man the one gift that was also the wreck — while the beautiful star came down, and down, and down, and somewhere across the black strait, behind a white door, twenty-one women slept one night away from their names, and a songbook waited to come home.

Chapter 21

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Twenty-One: The Garden Opens

The dissolution took nine days to draft and four minutes to sign, and Whitcombe wept when it was done, which surprised everyone including Whitcombe.

He had administered the Garden for eleven years — the rota, the recruitment, the standards codified to the centimeter — and when Fordham called him in and laid the wind-down across the desk and said, in the flat voice of a man reading his own better epitaph, *we are going to take the house apart, Geoffrey, gently, the way it should have been built,* the chief of staff had read it through twice, set it down, removed his regimental glasses, and said only: "Thank God. I'd run out of ways not to see it." Then he had picked up his pen and begun, that same afternoon, the enormous tender clerical labor of giving twenty-one women back their lives one document at a time — passports recovered from the office safe where they had been "kept," contracts paid to term and beyond, the staffing company quietly dismantled — and he did it with the ferocious competence of a man who had been waiting, without knowing it, eleven years for permission.

But the documents were the easy half. Jordan had said that once about a different lie, in a different country. The hard half was the heads.

They ran the clinic out of the residence itself, in the end, because Rosamie insisted, and Rosamie's insistences had the force of nine years behind them. "Not the grocery," she said. "Not somewhere borrowed and small, with the door watched. Here. In the house that kept them. Let them be un-made in the room where they were made." She had chosen the hammam — the embassy, the one place the bands had never reached, the marble heart where Friday had survived for nine years — and so it was there, in the dome of grey-veined stone with its falling columns of light, that Aiko set up the headset on a low table, and the household came to her, one at a time, by their own feet, in the order each woman chose for herself.

The bands came off first. That was the threshold rite nobody had planned and everybody understood the moment it began: each woman, arriving, unclasped the pearl-shelled unit from her own wrist and set it in a lacquered bowl by the door, and the small green breath of it died, and what was left was the pale band of skin where two years or four or nine had ridden — the same mark Dewi had shown the family on a tarmac, held up like a flag, *the gap with no beat coming to fill it.* Twenty-one wrists, over the days. Twenty-one small green lights extinguished by the hands they had governed. Rosamie kept the bowl.

And beside the headset, open on the marble, lay the songbook.

That was Vanessa's doing, though she would say it was Cora's. *Each one chooses a song,* she had told Aiko, *as she takes her name back. Not to perform. To claim. He kept the face

and threw away the song; we give the song back with the name, and we let her pick which one is hers.* So the un-making had a sound to it, through all the days it took: a woman in the chair, the headset warm, Aiko's hands finding the seam and running it backward, the wall coming down off whatever the refreshers had sanded — and then, after, when the woman opened her eyes and found her own edges intact, she would turn the tape-mended pages, and choose, and the choosing was how they knew the work had taken. Not a test on a console. A woman reaching for a song the way you reach for your own name in the dark, and finding it there.

Bituin chose first, because Bituin had gone first in Karama and considered the matter settled. *Bituing Marikit.* Of course. "It has my name in it," she said, scandalized that anyone would expect otherwise — *bituin*, star, the beautiful star the whole song begged to come down — and she sang four bars of it in the steam, badly, joyfully, her cook's hands flat against her sternum holding her three nephews' birthdays in, and the dome carried it up to the little glass skylights, and that was the clinic's first music.

Joy chose a song about a province she could see again now without the blank spaces. Len — Elena — chose a hymn, naturally, the seminarian's sister, and asked Aiko quietly first whether it was permitted to keep the way she'd learned to fold linen, which she'd learned *here*, which was hers now even though the house had taught it, and Aiko said yes, that's exactly right, you keep what you chose and lose what was installed, that's the whole of it, that's the only rule. Rowena chose a lullaby, and did not explain, and no one asked, because everyone in the dome knew about the daughter in Iloilo and the hummingbird card and the date she had finally, on a night in a guest suite, borrowed a pen to write.

It was, Tatum said afterward, the most beautiful work she had ever watched and the most frightening, because every single time, in the seconds before the wall came down, there was no way to know what was behind it, and Aiko had to go in blind, by feel, trusting the seam — *her* seam, the warm half of her own stolen science — to run the way she'd built it to run before strangers taught it cruelty. It took every grain of what she was. By the fourth day her hands shook between sessions and Linnéa fed her and made her sleep, and the household, who understood rationing better than anyone alive, began bringing the doktora small foods on the half-hour without being asked, an embassy looking after its locksmith.

Imee came last, because the believer would only lay down her faith after she had watched it be safe to do so twenty times.

She came to the hammam on the final day, after the others, when twenty of the twenty-one had taken their names and their songs and the dome had become a place of almost unbearable lightness — and she sat in the chair, and she did not take off her band.

"I know what you do," she said to Aiko. "I have watched you do it twenty times. You take down the wall and give them back the edges and let them choose what stays." Her hands were folded, the believer's stillness, except it was not quite the believer's stillness anymore; something in it had opened, the way Vanessa's question among the roses had asked it to. "I have a different call. I want you to hear it, and I want the wreckers to hear it, because they made a law and I am going to test it, and a law you don't test is just a wish."

Vanessa came in from the cool room. Linnéa, Tatum behind her. Rosamie stood by the bowl of dead bands, where she had stood for every session, the general who would be last out of her own country.

"I was Imelda," Imee said. "I want her name back. That part is yes — I am not Holly, I never agreed to be the plastic plant on the bar, give me Imelda." She drew a breath. "But I do not want you to take down all of it. There is a wall in me too, doktora, like the one you built for Maricel — except mine I built myself, with no machine, in a house in Pasay, around the years I weighed thirty-nine kilos and a man broke what he broke. The house — *this* house, Holly, the rota, the sleeping-so-well — it grew over that wall like the bougainvillea grows over the gate. And I know, I *know*, what you all think: that the bougainvillea is the cage. But for me, for the first year, it was the only thing holding the gate shut on the thing behind it." Her chin was level, the loyal opposition making its last and truest stand. "So here is my call. Give me Imelda. Give me my song. But the part of Holly that learned how to be safe — the stillness, the rota, the knowing-exactly-who-to-be-each-morning — I am keeping that. Not because he installed it. Because I am *choosing* it, now, today, in my own name, the way a woman chooses to keep a scar that healed over something worse. Do not improve me by taking it. Leave me the parts that held."

The dome was silent. The columns of light moved on the stone.

And here was the test, laid bare on the marble: because every instinct of rescue, every grain of the thing that had crossed the world to take this house apart, wanted to say *no, Imee, that's the conditioning talking, let us take it all, let us give you the clean true Imelda underneath* — wanted, in other words, to do precisely what Fordham had done, to decide from outside that a woman would be better as the version the rescuer could see was real. To improve her. For excellent reasons.

Vanessa knelt in front of the chair, the way Imee had once knelt in front of Rowena, the *mano* reversed.

"That's not the conditioning talking," Vanessa said. "That's *you*, deciding what to keep. Which is the only thing we ever came here to make possible." She looked up at the believer who had made the truest case anyone in that house could make against them, and who had just proved it from the inside. "Their names, their call. You're keeping the parts that held. Aiko will take down only the wall you point to, and leave standing every wall you built yourself. That's not us improving you. That's the opposite. That's the whole opposite, Imelda. Welcome back."

And Aiko, with hands that had not been steady in four days, did the most delicate work of the entire clinic — went in by feel along two seams at once, took down the installed wall and left the self-built one exactly where its owner kept it, the bougainvillea trimmed off the gate and the gate left shut by the hand that had a right to shut it — and when it was done, Imelda Reyes opened her eyes, and reached for the songbook, and turned the pages slowly, and chose, and did not sing it, only laid her palm flat on the page over a song about a woman who survives, and said: "This one. For later. When I am ready to sing it, I will know I am all the way home."

She kept her band, too. Took it from the bowl, dead and dark, and put it in her pocket. "A souvenir," she said, and almost smiled, "of the year I was kept safe by the wrong thing and got to keep the part that wasn't wrong." It was the most Wreckers sentence anyone had said all winter, and Linnéa — Linnéa, three weeks out of her silence — laughed out loud, the first full laugh since Ossiano, and the dome carried it up to the light.

They let the household decide everything after that, because deciding was the point.

Some left within the week — Joy to Tarlac and the sari-sari store with its renegotiated load tariff, Len to her brother's ordination with a year of books in her bag. Some stayed in the warm house while the wind-down ran its course, in no hurry, learning what it was to live somewhere by choice rather than contract. Two of the Marias decided to travel together before going home, having never once in nine years been permitted to go anywhere that wasn't on a rota. And Rosamie — Rosamie announced she would be the last out, because a general does not leave her country until every soul is across the border, and nobody argued, because nobody ever won an argument with Rosamie, and because it was true.

Maricel they brought out of the medical wing themselves, on the morning the dissolution was signed, and it was Linnéa who walked in to get her — Linnéa, who had let go of her hand in the snow five winters ago and spent five years not knowing, who had stood in a room while her friend let go in the air to catch Imee. She came into the one-pin room and Maricel was sitting in the chair she'd chosen, dancer's spine, and she looked up, and for a moment neither of them said anything at all.

"Your roots are showing," Maricel said.

"They have been for weeks," Linnéa said. "I've been busy." And then the Swedish came, low, but it was not the filthy kind this time; it was the other kind, the kind you say to someone you let go of once and got back, and Maricel stood, and they did not collide this time — they had learned, both of them, the cost of grabbing — they simply reached, and held, carefully, two dancers who finally trusted the catch.

In the hammam an hour later, Maricel took the chair, and Aiko reached for the wall around her December — and found it exactly as she'd left it on the nineteenth, intact, untouched, every sharp edge of her father's parol and her mother's table and the thirteen dawns precisely where its owner kept them. There was almost nothing to un-make; Maricel had been protected before she was ever conditioned again. So Aiko only took the band's last reach off her, and confirmed the firewall, and said, "It held. All of it. You walked into that room on the nineteenth carrying everything, and you walked out still carrying it. They never touched it."

Maricel was quiet for a moment.

"I knew," she said. "After. When I reached for my father and he was there." She turned the songbook's pages, and chose — and her choice was not a kundiman at all, but the carol, *O Holy Night*, the one they had sung eleven times in an aquarium on the worst Noche Buena of her life, and the family went very still, until Maricel looked up with the old Berns mischief surfacing through three years of masonry and said: "I am taking it *back*. They made me

sing it as Holly to strangers while my mother's table sat down without me. So I am going to sing it once, here, as Maricel, to people who know my name — and then it will be mine again, and not theirs." And she sang it, in the dome, as herself, and it was not the eleven times in the tank; it was the thing the eleven times had stolen, returned.

The celebration was that night, in the orangery, because Rosamie said the room that had hosted the festival of keeping should host one festival of letting-go before the glass came down, and Letty came from Karama with food enough for a province, and Father Anil came and blessed the table and called every woman present by her own name, slowly, like communion, *the Body of Christ, Maricel; the Body of Christ, Rowena; the Body of Christ, Imelda,* and there was not a dry face in the glass cathedral.

And it was joy — real, loud, unkept joy, the household and the family and an old grocer and a parish priest under thirty thousand points of mother-of-pearl light that meant nothing now but pretty, the dhow gone, the bands dead in a lacquered bowl, the songbook passing hand to hand. It was everything they had worked for.

And Vanessa stood a little apart from it, near the glass, where the garden was dark, and watched, and did not fully enter — and Jordan found her there, because Jordan always found her there, and stood beside her, the held centimeter between them, watching the family they'd made and the family they'd freed become, for one night, indistinguishable.

"You're doing the thing," he said quietly. "The audit."

"He wasn't wrong," Vanessa said. She said it simply, to the glass, the way you set a heavy thing down. "Elliott. On the dhow. *It's easier to destroy than to create.* He was right, Jordan. Look at what we do. We arrive, we find the lie, we take the house apart, and we leave — sixteen times now. We're very good at it. We're the best on earth at it." She watched Maricel sing something to Letty across the room, both of them laughing. "Everything beautiful in this room tonight, somebody else made. Cora made the song. These women made the courage. Rosamie made the door. Aiko's *un-making* — even that was just running someone else's making backward. We brought a hammer. We always bring a hammer. He built a paradise, and we brought a hammer, and the hammer was *right*, and it was still just a hammer." She finally looked at him. "What have we ever built, Jordan? Sixteen cities. What did we ever make instead of break?"

And Jordan looked at her, and did not answer fast, because the question deserved better than fast, and because he could see she had been carrying it since the dhow the way Fordham carried his Tuesday — and he understood that this was not a question to answer in an orangery full of other people's joy.

"Not here," he said gently. "That one we answer at home. Just us." The held centimeter hummed. "Tonight belongs to them. But you're asking the oldest question there is, and it has an answer, and I've known it for fourteen cities, and I'm going to tell you the whole of it somewhere there's no one to perform it for." A pause. "Including the rule, Vanessa. Especially the rule. We are nearly done here. And when we're done — when the last woman is across

Rosamie's border — I am going to take you home and answer that question properly, and it is going to take all night, and not one minute of it is going to be a hammer."

Vanessa looked at him for a long moment, the longest year of their lives behind them and one room of it left, and something in the audit eased — not answered, not yet, but *promised*, set down where it would be paid.

"All night," she said.

"All night."

And across the orangery someone called Vanessa's name — her real one, the one she'd given the household the night she told them what wreckers were — and she went back into the light, into the family and the freed, under the pearls that honored the original, and let herself, for the rest of the night, be only happy, the audit folded and pocketed against a darkness still coming, where the oldest question would finally get its whole answer.

Chapter 22

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Twenty-Two: The Border

The Garden emptied the way a held breath leaves the body — not all at once, but in its own order, each soul across the border in the order she chose, while the gardeners, paid through the season, kept watering a paradise that no longer needed to justify itself to anyone.

Whitcombe ran the wind-down like the finest event of his career, which in a sense it was. Passports came out of the office safe and went back into the hands that owned them — and that was the first morning Vanessa understood the full weight of what the house had been, because a passport is a small thing, and watching a woman hold her own again after years of its being "kept safe" for her was like watching someone be handed back a tooth, or a wedding ring, or a year. Joy held hers and did not open it, just pressed it flat between both palms the way Letty pressed a balikbayan box, the way you hold a thing you are not yet sure is permitted. Then she opened it, and found her own face at twenty-three, and laughed, and cried, and put it in her bag and asked Whitcombe, with the brisk fierce practicality that had survived everything, when the next flight to Manila was and whether the foundation's bridging payment would clear before the sari-sari store's February inventory came due. It would. Whitcombe had seen to it personally. He had, it turned out, an enormous talent for restitution; it had simply been pointed the wrong way for eleven years.

They went home in twos and threes, the way they had always done everything, because the rota had taught them company and the company had outlasted the rota. The two Marias left together for a week in Palawan they had been promising each other in whispers for nine years, the first journey of their lives that was not on anyone's schedule, and they sent Tatum a photograph from a banca on impossible blue water, both of them laughing, indistinguishable in the old way and utterly distinct in the new, two cousins who would never again answer to one name. Len went to her brother's seminary with a year of books and a songbook page she had copied out by hand. Ana Marie went to Bulacan to a cousin she had been afraid she'd forgotten the face of, and had not, because Aiko had given the face back in the dome. Bituin went last of the early ones, to three nephews whose birthdays she now carried in her body like the dates were carved there, and she cooked the entire household a farewell *adobo* before she left, weeping into it again, except this time she let the salt show.

Rowena did not rush. Rowena had a daughter who had started not to know her, and a reunion that could not be repaired in an airport, and so she stayed in the warm house and made a plan with Tatum and the foundation — a slow approach, a long visit, a child reintroduced to a mother over weeks rather than ambushed by one in a doorway — and on her last evening in Dubai she finished the hummingbird card at last, at the kitchen table, with a date written inside it in her own hand, and showed no one what the date was, because it was hers.

And the household that had been sent home discovered, one by one, the thing the family had built the whole job to give them and had never once been able to promise would feel like this: that going home was not the same as being sent. They left as themselves, in their own names,

toward their own becoming — toward provinces and seminaries and sari-sari stores and daughters and the long unrationed rest of their lives — and not one of them was kept. That was the difference Vanessa had named on a terrace at Christmas and could only now, watching the border crossings, see whole: Fordham's love had needed them at twenty-eight behind a white door forever; this was love that packed their bags and drove them to the airport and let them walk away into people no one would recognize, and called the walking-away the *point*. The bravest ordinary thing. The thing he could not do. They did it twenty-one times in a fortnight and called it Tuesday.

Rosamie was last, as she had said she would be.

"A general does not leave her country," she told Vanessa, on the second-to-last evening, in the hammam where it had all turned, "until every soul is across the border." She had the lacquered bowl of dead bands in her lap — twenty-one of them now, dark, the green breaths long out — and she was deciding, Vanessa realized, what to do with them, the way a soldier decides what to do with the colors after the war. "I have run this house for nine years by deciding what to protect, alone. Tonight there is no one left to protect. It is the strangest feeling I have ever had. I keep reaching for the rota in my head and finding the page blank." She looked up. "You did this. You and your hammer."

"You did this," Vanessa said. "You held the door for nine years so that when someone finally tried it the right way, there'd be something behind it worth opening. We didn't free a household, Rosamie. We freed one you'd already kept alive with a notebook and a Friday bath. The hammer was the easy part."

Rosamie was quiet, turning a dead band in her fingers.

"I am not going home yet," she said. "There is no one in Iloilo waiting the way Rowena's daughter waits, or Bituin's boys. I sent my money home for nine years and the people it built are strangers to me now — that is the price nobody puts in the advertisement." She said it without self-pity, a general counting her own casualties last. "So I will travel. I have never once chosen a direction. I think I would like to find out what I want, which is a question I have not been permitted to ask since I was thirty." A pause, and then the closest thing to vulnerability the household's general had ever shown: "Your foundation. The one that bridges the others. Does it — is there work, for a woman who knows how to run an impossible house and keep twenty-two secrets and find the seam in any system ever built?"

Vanessa looked at her for a long moment — at the finest operational mind she had worked beside or against in sixteen cities, the woman who had drawn up both loan-night rotas and seen the knife in the pearl theme and said *next time I will open the door* — and felt the particular click of recognition the family had felt exactly four times before, in four cities, when a stranger turned out to be one of them.

"Not yet," Vanessa said. "First you go find out what you want. That's an order, and it's the last one anyone gets to give you." She smiled. "But keep the number, Rosamie. We have a way of needing the person who can find the seam. And we never pay — I should warn you about that now. It's a whole conversation."

Rosamie almost smiled. She set the bowl of dead bands down on the warm marble, and stood, and did not look back at the dome where Friday had survived for nine years, because looking back, she had taught a younger woman once, was not in the handbook — and then she stopped at the door, deliberately, and looked back at all of it, long and slow, because the handbook was dissolved now, and she could.

Maricel left on the morning of the twenty-eighth of January, and she did not leave empty-handed, because Linnéa had driven to Karama at dawn and come back with the box.

It had sat on Letty's high shelf for three weeks, half-packed, unsent — the parol wrapped in a sweater so the points wouldn't crush, the mother's Pampanga address in Maricel's own hand on the customs slip, the thing the house had forbidden her to finish when it took her apart. Linnéa set it on the kitchen table in front of Maricel without a word, and Maricel looked at it for a long time, at her own handwriting on the slip, the handwriting of a woman who three weeks ago had not been sure she'd be allowed a date or a destination or a self to send.

"They wouldn't let me finish it," Maricel said.

"I know," Linnéa said. "So finish it now. Or don't send it at all." A beat, the old Berns directness. "You don't have to ship the hug, Mari. You could carry it."

Maricel looked up.

"There's a flight to Manila tonight," Linnéa said. "Connecting to Clark. You'd be in Pampanga by tomorrow afternoon. Your mother's table." She was very carefully not making it a plan, not pushing, the catcher who had learned at last not to grab. "The foundation already booked it. You can tear up the ticket. But the box doesn't have to go by sea this time, and neither do you. Eight weeks, or eight hours. Your call."

And Maricel Bautista — who had kept thirteen consecutive years of Simbang Gabi, nine dawn Masses for one wish, thirteen wishes spent and one always owed — sat at the kitchen table with the box she had packed like a prayer and understood that the wish had come due. She did not cry. She had budgeted her joy for three years to have enough to spend all at once, and she had spent a great deal of it already, but there was, it turned out, more; there was always more; that was the thing the house had never understood about the women it tried to keep at a fixed volume. Joy was not a staple that ran out. It was a thing that grew when you finally took it home.

"I'll carry it," she said. "But I'm not tearing up anything. We send Rowena's by sea, and Bituin's, and all of them — the boxes still get sent, that's the rule, a woman in Karama wrote it." She stood, and picked up the box, the parol's points pressing soft against the sweater. "Mine I carry. The rest we ship. And next Christmas—" she stopped, and the old mischief surfaced, the best mover Berns ever politely hated, "—next Christmas, Linnéa Bergström, you are coming to Pampanga, and my mother is going to feed you until you cannot stand, and my uncle is going to win the karaoke because no one has the heart to score him honestly, and you are going to sing, and I am going to laugh until the stage manager comes." She held the

box against her chest, the hug she would carry home by hand. "Bring your terrible Swedish apologizing-to-the-song voice. I dare you. Prove me wrong."

"I'll come," Linnéa said, and her voice was not steady, and for once she let it not be steady. "I'll come and I'll sing and you'll laugh. I promise. Hej då, Maricel."

"Not *hej då*," Maricel said, at the door, the box in her arms, the parol going home. "*Paalam* is goodbye-forever. We don't say that one. *Hanggang sa muli.*" She smiled. "Until again."

"Hanggang sa muli," Linnéa said, getting it almost right, and Maricel laughed — there it was, the laugh, surrounded by no aquarium, performed for no stranger, owed to no one — and went out into the morning with her own name and her own date and a star folded down small enough to look like nothing, carrying the hug home by hand.

By the twenty-ninth the house was empty except for the family and the gardeners and Aiko's headset in its foam.

The work was done. That was the fact Vanessa stood inside that evening, on the terrace of the suite across the city, with the Garden gone dark on its island and the last of the household scattered toward their own lives and the man who had built the cage sitting somewhere in his own emptying country with a recording of his wife at sixty-two and the rest of his memory ebbing out the way the tide goes, no wave you can point to. The job was finished. The last woman was across the border. And the rule — the third rule, the one sworn the night of the vote, the one that said the reward waits until the work is done — released, all at once, the way it always did at the end, except that this time it had waited longer than it had ever waited in the history of the partnership, longer than the forty days they'd set in the autumn, far longer, a whole winter of held breath, the longest edge of their lives.

She felt it go. She felt the gauge drop to zero, the law lift, the centimeter she had been holding for six weeks — at the gala, in the corridor at dawn, by the orangery glass — suddenly available to close.

Jordan came out onto the terrace. He had felt it too; they always felt it at the same moment; that was one of the ten thousand small facts that made them what they were.

"It's done," he said.

"It's done."

He stood beside her at the rail, the held centimeter between them, the city throwing its light up against the haze, and for the length of one more breath neither of them moved — not from law now, but from the strange vertigo of a discipline so long-kept that its ending felt like falling. Then Vanessa turned, and looked at him, the longest year of their lives behind them and the rule finally down, and she did not close the centimeter yet, because there was a thing that came first, a thing she had been carrying since the dhow, a question with blood on it.

"Not here," Jordan said gently, before she could open her mouth — reading her, the way he read her. "You asked me at the orangery what we ever built. I told you that one we answer at home. Just us." He took her hand, finally, the first touch in a winter of not-touching, and the centimeter closed, and the law was a memory. "We're going home, Vanessa. And I'm going to answer it properly. It's going to take all night, and not one minute of it is going to be a hammer."

But that was the next chapter, and the next chapter was theirs, and no one else's — which was, after all, the rule.

And so the door closed on the terrace, and the Garden lay dark and emptied on its manufactured island, paradise watering itself for no one, the white door standing open at last on twenty-two empty rooms — and somewhere over the Gulf a plane carried a dancer and a star home to her mother's table, and a general chose a direction for the first time in her life, and a man who had tried to keep the tide from coming in sat alone in the room he had spent three fortunes never to sit in, and listened to a recording of the only thing he had ever loved, becoming.

Chapter 23

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Chapter Twenty-Three: What We Came Home With

Linnéa and Tatum left for Stockholm on the thirtieth, and they left the way they did everything, which was together.

They had packed the night before — Tatum methodically, Linnéa by throwing things at a suitcase and trusting the universe — and in the morning the five of them stood among the bags in the suite's main room, and it was the particular awkwardness of people who have just done the largest thing of their lives together and now have to perform the small ordinary motions of an airport run, as if the winter had been a holiday. Nobody was good at it. They had never once been good at goodbyes; the work usually spared them by simply ending and scattering them mid-stride. This was different. This had a doorway in it, and people on either side of the doorway, and time to feel it.

"Don't," Linnéa warned, pointing at Tatum, whose eyes were already doing the thing. "Don't you start, because if you start I start, and I have a reputation."

"You cried at the two Marias' photograph from Palawan," Aiko said.
"That was allergies. Palawan is famous for it."
"It was a photograph, Linnéa," Tatum reminded her, gently.
"Photographs carry allergens. Everyone knows this. It's the JPEG." Linnéa hauled her bag onto her shoulder, and then the bravado ran out the way it had been running out all winter at the true moments, and she looked at Vanessa and Jordan — the two she had followed into fourteen cities and one century — and said, more quietly than the room was used to: "That was the best one. You know that, yes? Of all of them. That was the one that mattered." She didn't elaborate. She didn't have to. They had all been there for the aquarium and the courtyard and the steam and the dome, and they all knew something had happened this winter that had not happened in the other fifteen jobs — that they had wrecked a thing and the wreckage had turned out to be twenty-two doorways, and that Linnéa Bergström had walked back through a door she'd lost five winters ago in the snow.

"Bring her to Stockholm," Tatum said. "Maricel. When she's ready. The company at Berns would lose their minds." She hugged Vanessa, hard, the heart of the family embracing its head. "And come *yourselves*. Not for a job. For nothing. For dinner. We have a guest room, and Linnéa has finally learned to cook one entire meal."

"I have learned to cook *two* meals," Linnéa said, wounded.

"You have learned to cook one meal and to order the second very confidently."

And that was the goodbye, in the end — not a speech, but the two of them bickering their way out the door, Tatum turning once at the threshold to look back with the wet bright eyes nobody teased anymore, Linnéa not turning at all, because Linnéa had taught herself long ago, in a city that goes blue at three in the afternoon, that you do not look back at the people

you intend to see again. *Hanggang sa muli*, Maricel had said. Until again. The family did not say *paalam*. They never said that one.

The door closed. Stockholm had them.

"I'm keeping my room a few more days," Aiko said, picking up her own bag. "Down the hall. "I'll find you before I fly." And she went, two doors down the corridor, leaving them to it — and the suite was suddenly very large, and held two.

Vanessa stood in the middle of the just-emptied room with her arms loosely crossed, and did not sit, and Jordan watched her not sit, and knew it was coming, because he had felt her carrying it since the dhow.

"I wanted to burn the town down," she said. "Not leave it. *Burn* it. That's where I started — you know that better than anyone alive; you were there for the first one, you watched me do it and call it justice." She looked out the window, where across the water the Garden's island lay dark and emptied, paradise watering itself for no one. "And Elliott was right, on the boat. Any idiot can light a match. Turns out I was that idiot for a long time, and I gave it a beautiful name. *Wrecking.* Liberation. The truest thing at the party." Her voice was steady and stripped, the audit she'd been running since the dhow finally laid open. "But here's the thing I can't make balance, Jordan. I have *more* now than when we started. More people who'd answer the phone at four in the morning — Aiko, who I found being spent. Tatum, who we pulled out of a worse fire than any we ever set. Linnéa, who'd burn the world for us and nearly has. A general in Iloilo who's going to call when she works out what she wants. A choir teacher who sang into a telephone for us." She turned to him. "I didn't build any of it. I never laid a brick. All I have ever carried into any city is the hammer. And somehow I have more — I have more—"

And there it was, the word, standing exactly where she'd brought herself, and she stopped — because she was Vanessa Smart, who had spent years exposing the gap between what people said and what was true, and the word was the most counterfeited word she knew, the alibi of every marriage she'd ever wrecked, and she could not, even now, even here, just *say* it.

Jordan watched her stall at it. And he did not supply it smoothly, did not produce it like a man who'd been holding it ready — because he was the one who had sat across a lamp from Elliott Fordham and watched what happens to a man who keeps that word by force, who turns it into a household and an ark and a white door, and he distrusted it in his own mouth nearly as much as she distrusted it in hers. He came at it sideways, almost reluctant, half-asking:

"More love," he said. "That's the word you won't say. I don't use it either — you know that; I watched a man use it like a crowbar all winter." He came closer, the centimeter that had ruled them for six weeks simply gone. "But it's the accurate one, and you've got the most honest eye of anyone I know, so you can't make the books balance because you're doing them with the wrong word. You didn't build a *thing*. Fordham built things — marble, trusts, a household that couldn't leave. We never built one single thing that keeps." He took her face in his hands. "We built the people who got to *leave*. And they keep choosing to come back.

You can't point to that. You can't put it under glass. It grew up around the wrecking while neither of us was watching — because the one thing you do that isn't a hammer or a match, the thing you did to twenty-two women in that house, is you leave the door open and you let people become." He almost smiled. "We're the only demolition crew on earth that came home with a family. He couldn't see it because it's the one kind of creation you don't get to keep. It walks away into people you don't recognize and phones you at four in the morning anyway."

Vanessa looked at him a long moment — the longest year of their lives behind them, the oldest question finally answered, not refuted but re-weighed on the right scale — and the audit she'd carried from the dhow folded itself shut, and what was under it, after sixteen jobs and fourteen cities and one borrowed century, was the simplest thing, the thing she'd circled and refused and let him hand her at last.

"Say it again," she said. "Slower. You're allowed. The rule's down."

"Love," Jordan said. "You. All of it. The whole impossible unkeepable—"

And she closed the last of the distance herself, the way she'd wanted to since a terrace at Christmas, since a corridor at dawn, since thirty thousand pearls and a winter of held breath — and the rule was a memory, and the question was answered, and the emptied suite that had held the whole family an hour ago held only the two of them now, and then held nothing it would ever tell, because some things are the reward, and the reward is theirs and no one else's, which had always, from the very first city, been the whole of the third rule and the best of it.

Across the dark water the Garden watered itself for no one, the white door standing open on twenty-two empty rooms. And the demolition crew that had come home with a family let the longest edge of their lives end at last, right there where they'd said goodbye, because there had never been any reason to go anywhere else — the home was not the room, had never been the room. It was the two of them, and the people who'd walk back through the open door, and that was the one thing they'd ever built, and it could not be kept, and that was exactly why it was theirs.

Chapter 24

THE WRECKERS: Book #16 — "The Garden of Eves" — Epilogue

Jordan was sitting on the edge of the bed in his shirt and trousers, elbows on his knees. Vanessa stood by the window, barefoot, still in the dark green dress she had worn to the last necessary appearance. Neither of them had changed yet.

When the soft knock came at the suite door, Vanessa already knew who it was and what she had come to do.

Aiko stood in the hallway in simple black clothes, her hair still damp from the shower. She looked at Vanessa for a moment, then past her to Jordan. Her expression was calm, but there was something bright and deliberate in her eyes.

“I’m here to celebrate,” she said.

Vanessa stepped back without a word and let her in.

This particular ritual between the three of them was old now — old enough to have survived Paris, old enough to have become something they returned to after the hardest jobs, when the work had required too much distance and too much control. It had begun years earlier as a private test Aiko had designed and Vanessa had agreed to let her run. Jordan had never been told the full shape of it at the time. That had been part of the game. Aiko had installed the trigger cleanly, deleted the short-term memory of the installation itself, and then activated it later with nothing but her voice — that flat, instructional, almost bored tone she used when she wanted to watch what happened to him without ever breaking character.

Vanessa had watched the first time with her hand over her mouth, trying not to laugh. She had been the one who kept the game alive afterward. Sometimes she would catch Aiko’s eye across a room during a job and give the smallest nod, and Aiko would understand that tonight, when it was over, she was allowed to bring it back. It had become one of the quiet, recurring ways the three of them marked the end of something difficult — Aiko stepping back into that precise, clinical register while Vanessa watched and Jordan surrendered to it.

It was never about the headset anymore. The program itself had been removed years ago. What remained was the voice, the game, and the particular kind of trust it required.

Tonight, after what they had just done in Dubai, Vanessa had looked at Aiko once in the war room before they separated and given her that same small nod. No words. Just permission.

Aiko closed the door behind her and locked it. She set her small bag down on the console table — the same bag that had carried the headset through the final weeks of the job — and turned to face them both.

For a few seconds, no one spoke.

Then Aiko's voice changed.

It dropped into that same flat, instructional register — calm, precise, slightly bored, as if she were reading from a laboratory manual that had nothing at all to do with the three of them standing in a hotel suite in Dubai.

"When concluding a long-term behavioral study," she said, "it is important to establish a post-experimental reward protocol. This allows the primary researchers to decompress while maintaining the integrity of the observed variables. Begin by confirming that all external recording devices have been powered down and secured. In this case, there are no external recording devices. That simplifies the procedure."

Jordan let out a slow breath. Vanessa's mouth curved, small and private.

Aiko continued without looking at either of them directly.

"Once the environment has been secured, the lead researcher should direct the subject to a stable surface. The bed is acceptable. Remove upper garments first to avoid entanglement. Lower garments may follow. Take care not to rush. Rushing introduces uncontrolled variables into the data set."

Jordan stood up. He pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it. His hands went to his belt.

Aiko kept speaking in the same even tone.

"Note the subject's current physiological state. Elevated heart rate is expected. Visible vascular response in the genital area is also expected and should be documented as confirmation that the reward protocol has been correctly initiated. Do not adjust the stimulus yet. Allow the response to develop naturally."

Vanessa moved to the armchair and sat down, one leg crossed over the other. She was watching Aiko with open fascination.

Jordan pushed his trousers and underwear down and stepped out of them. His cock was already hard, flushed dark at the head.

Aiko's voice did not change.

"Once the subject is fully undressed, position may be established based on access and comfort. In this instance, the bed remains the most stable option. The researcher may now approach. It is acceptable to make physical contact. Begin with the upper body if preferred, or move directly to penetration. Either approach is valid provided it is recorded."

Jordan crossed to her. He reached for the hem of her tank top and pulled it up. Aiko lifted her arms without breaking rhythm.

"Observe any changes in the subject's breathing as clothing is removed. Increased rate is normal. If the subject makes involuntary vocalizations, these should be noted but not interpreted as data contamination. They are expected side effects of the protocol."

Jordan stripped her efficiently — tank top, then the soft black trousers and underwear. When she was naked, he walked her backward until the backs of her knees hit the bed. She sat, then lay back as he climbed over her.

Aiko continued in that same calm, instructional voice.

“Penetration may now occur. Enter slowly at first to allow for accommodation. Once full insertion has been achieved, movement may begin. Depth and rhythm should be adjusted according to the subject’s responses rather than according to any pre-determined schedule. There is no required pace for this phase of the protocol.”

Jordan pushed into her.

Aiko’s voice stayed perfectly flat.

“It is acceptable to increase force if the data suggests the subject can accommodate it. Gripping the hips or shoulders may provide better leverage. If the researcher wishes to change position, this is also acceptable. Turning the subject onto their stomach often allows for greater depth and different angles of stimulation. Any of these adjustments are within acceptable parameters.”

Jordan groaned and pulled out. He flipped her onto her stomach, pulled her hips up, and pushed back into her from behind. One hand fisted in her hair. He started fucking her harder.

Aiko kept going without missing a beat.

“This position allows for increased leverage and deeper penetration. The researcher may apply additional force if desired. It is also acceptable to reach around and stimulate the clitoris during this phase. Doing so may accelerate the subject’s response curve. Either choice is valid. Remember to maintain consistent verbal stimulus throughout. Inconsistent stimulus can skew the final data.”

Jordan fucked her harder, his hips slapping against her ass. Aiko’s voice remained even and instructional.

“If the researcher requires additional stability, bracing one hand on the bed or on the subject’s shoulder is recommended. This reduces the risk of losing balance during higher-intensity phases. It is also important to monitor the subject’s breathing for any signs of distress. In this case, no distress is indicated. The subject appears to be accommodating the increased force without difficulty.”

Jordan made a rough, helpless sound and drove into her harder.

Aiko continued, perfectly calm.

“It is acceptable to pull the subject’s hair if that provides additional leverage or if the researcher finds it useful for maintaining control of the angle. Hair pulling is a common variable in this type of protocol and does not invalidate the results. You may also lean

forward and brace your weight if you need more stability for harder thrusts. Both techniques are acceptable."

Jordan was breathing hard now, fucking her with deep, punishing strokes. Aiko's voice never wavered.

"You may come inside the subject whenever you are ready. Internal ejaculation is within the parameters of the reward protocol. You may also choose to withdraw and finish externally if that is preferred for observational purposes. Either option is acceptable. There is no time limit on this phase. You may continue for as long as the data requires."

Jordan came with a low, guttural sound, buried deep inside her, his hand still tight in her hair. His hips jerked a few times before he finally stilled, breathing hard against the back of her neck.

Aiko lay beneath him, completely composed.

After a moment, she spoke again in the same flat tone.

"You may remain inside the subject for a recovery period if desired. This is acceptable. Once the researcher has recovered, a second round may be initiated if additional data is needed. The subject is still available. You may change positions again if you wish. Any position that allows for continued observation is valid."

Jordan let out a shaky, disbelieving laugh against her skin.

"Jesus Christ, Aiko."

Aiko answered immediately, voice unchanged.

"Religious references are not relevant to the current protocol. Would you like to continue with a second round, or would you prefer to conclude the observation period at this time?"

Jordan groaned into her shoulder.

Vanessa, still in the armchair, made a small, helpless sound that was half laugh and half something else entirely.

Aiko waited, perfectly still beneath Jordan, and then spoke again in that same calm, instructional voice.

"If a second round is desired, the researcher may now withdraw and reposition the subject. Face-to-face positioning is acceptable if eye contact or additional manual stimulation is required. Alternatively, the subject may be placed on top if the researcher prefers a more passive role during recovery. Both options are valid. Please indicate your preference so that the protocol may continue without unnecessary delay."

Jordan pulled out slowly and rolled onto his back, pulling Aiko with him until she straddled his hips. He was already getting hard again.

Aiko looked down at him, completely neutral.

“You may enter me again whenever you are ready. You may set the pace. If you require the subject to move, you may direct her with your hands on her hips. This is acceptable. You may also reach up and stimulate the breasts if that provides additional arousal. Either choice is within protocol.”

Jordan pushed back into her.

Aiko began to ride him slowly, still speaking in that same flat, detached, instructional tone.

“If you want the subject to move faster, you may increase the pressure on her hips. If you want her to slow down, you may reduce it. Both adjustments are acceptable. You may also thrust upward to meet her movements if that is preferred. There is no required rhythm. You may come inside her again if you wish. Or you may hold back. Both options are valid. I will continue speaking either way.”

Jordan groaned and thrust up into her harder.

Aiko’s voice never changed.

“You may also change positions again if you require a different angle. Placing the subject on her back with her legs raised allows for deeper penetration and better access. This is a common adjustment in this type of protocol. You may come whenever you are ready. There is no time limit. I will keep talking throughout.”

Jordan came again a few minutes later, gripping her hips hard as he emptied inside her for the second time. Aiko stayed on top of him, perfectly calm, still speaking in that same flat instructional voice about proper documentation procedures and the importance of consistent environmental conditions during extended observation periods.

When he finally stilled, she looked down at him and said, in the exact same tone:

“The reward protocol appears to have been successfully completed. Would you like to discuss the results of the observation, or would you prefer to initiate a third round?”

Jordan let out a broken, exhausted laugh and pulled her down onto his chest.

Vanessa, still watching from the armchair, finally spoke. Her voice was low and warm.

“Jesus, Aiko.”

Aiko turned her head slightly on Jordan’s chest and looked at her, completely neutral.

“Religious references remain non-relevant to the protocol,” she said calmly. “However, if the secondary researcher would like to participate in the next phase, that can be arranged. Please indicate your preference.”

Vanessa stood up.

She crossed the room slowly, eyes on Aiko the entire time.

“I think,” she said softly, “we’re going to need a much longer observation period.”

Aiko looked up at her from where she lay on Jordan’s chest, and for the first time since she had started speaking, something very small and very real moved behind her eyes.

“Then we should begin immediately,” she said. “Before any of the variables cool down.”

She reached out one hand toward Vanessa.

“Remove your dress,” she said in that same flat, instructional voice. “Upper garments first. Take your time. There is no need to rush the process.”

Vanessa smiled — slow, dark, and deeply fond — and reached for the zipper at the side of her dress.

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